JOURNEYS IN MEANING:
PSYCHOLOGICAL ADJUSTMENT TO TRAUMA IN RESETTLED SYRIAN REFUGEES

Lisa Marta Machado de Matos

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for degree of
Doctor in Philosophy
Specialty: Clinical Psychology

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To all those who have ever had to make the harrowing decision
to leave their homeland in search of peace and freedom.
I remain in awe of your courage.

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For the past 18 years, I have had the privilege of working with men and women whose life circumstances have repeatedly challenged their sense of humanity and robbed them of home and of the freedoms and opportunities we take for granted. And yet, they thrived. I carry their stories with me and this work is for them.

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He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.
Friedrich Nietzsche

Keywords:

Meaning-making; psychological adjustment; refugee experience; collective trauma

Palavras-chave:

Atribuição de sentido; ajustamento psicológico; experiência de refúgio; trauma coletivo

الكلمات المفتاحيّة: صنع المعنى؛ التكيّف النفسي؛ تجربة اللاجئين؛ الصدمة الجماعيّة.

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ABSTRACT

The ability to make meaning of extreme events is a key determinant of psychological adjustment to trauma. Guided by Park's (2010) integrated meaning-making model, the principal aim of this dissertation was to investigate the meaning-making experiences of resettled Syrian refugees and the impact of those experiences on posttraumatic adjustment. To this end, we conducted a mixed-methods cross-sectional study, with two phases of data collection and two independent samples. A total of 44 Syrian war-exposed adults living in urban communities across continental Portugal participated in Phase 1 Focus Groups (n = 2; 5 participants) and Phase 2 individual interviews (n = 39). Empirical results are described in Chapters 3 to 7. Key results identified: (1) exposure to significant meaning-shattering events pre-, during, and post-flight; (2) the centrality of pre-war global meanings related to identity, justice, control, God, expectations of normality, intact family and country, and peace to appraise the war and forced displacement; (3) situational appraisals as both intra- and interpersonal processes subject to revisiting with new trauma, new information, time, and context; (4) cognitive-specific, as well as immediate and gradual meaning violations; (5) determinants of search for meaning including cumulative stressors, availability of cognitive resources, stage of displacement, social support, coping strategies, and developmental age; (6) negative, positive, ambivalent, and unresolved meanings-made of trauma; and (7) psychological adjustment to refugee trauma as a continuum of responses, from distress to perceptions of growth. Findings suggest that meaning-making of refugee trauma entails a set of concurrent, dynamic, cognitive-specific trajectories that are informed by place and sociopolitical context, and thus prone to be repeatedly revisited. Findings further challenge the concept of successful psychological adjustment to trauma as an end-state. This work highlights the need to promote adaptive meaning-making as an integrated experience that prioritizes repairing the meanings most severely challenged by war, including sense of justice, belonging, control, as well as the possibility of a peaceful and safe future.

RESUMO

O processo de atribuição de sentido a acontecimentos extremos é um determinante-chave do ajustamento psicológico ao trauma. Tendo por base o modelo teórico integrado de atribuição de sentido (Park, 2010), este trabalho teve como principal objetivo investigar os processos de atribuição de sentido em refugiados sírios reinstalados, bem como o impacto desses processos no ajustamento pós-traumático. Para tal, foi realizado um estudo transversal, de métodos mistos, com duas fases de recolha de dados e duas amostras independentes. Um total de 44 sobreviventes de guerra sírios, adultos, reinstalados em diferentes cidades portuguesas, participaram em Grupos Focais (Fase 1; n = 2, 5 participantes) e em entrevistas individuais (Fase 2; n = 39). Os Capítulos 3 a 7 descrevem os resultados empíricos. Os principais resultados identificaram: (1) exposição a números significativos de acontecimentos potencialmente traumáticos antes, durante e após a fuga; (2) centralidade de sentidos globais (i.e., *global meanings*) relativos a identidade, justiça, controlo, Deus, expectativas de normalidade, família e país intactos, e paz, na avaliação das experiências de guerra e migração forçada; (3) avaliações situacionais (i.e., *situational meanings*) enquanto processos tanto intrínsecos como extrínsecos, reavaliados com exposição a novos traumas, a nova informação, com o tempo e contexto; (4) violações de sentido (i.e., *meaning violations*) tanto imediatas como progressivas e que afetam cognições específicas; (5) determinantes de procura de sentido, incluindo stressores cumulativos, disponibilidade de recursos cognitivos, período migratório, suporte social, estratégias de evitamento e idade; (6) sentidos atribuídos ao trauma (i.e., *meanings-made*) negativos, positivos, ambivalentes e incompletos; e (7) ajustamento psicológico ao trauma associado à experiência de refúgio como um continuum de respostas, que vão do distress a perceções de crescimento psicológico. Os resultados sugerem que a atribuição de sentido ao trauma associado à experiência de refúgio inclui um conjunto de trajetórias paralelas, dinâmicas e relativas a cognições específicas, que são informadas pelo contexto sociopolítico e lugar e, como tal, propensas a serem repetidamente reavaliadas. Por outro lado, os resultados desafiam conceitos de ajustamento psicológico positivo enquanto processo com um fim definido. Este estudo destaca a necessidade de promover processos adaptativos de atribuição de sentido enquanto experiência integrada, que priorize a reparação das estruturas cognitivas mais severamente danificadas pelo trauma, incluindo sentido de justiça, pertença, controlo, bem como a expectativa de um futuro em paz e segurança.

Palavras-chave:

Atribuição de sentido; ajustamento psicológico; experiência de refúgio; trauma coletivo

الملخّص

تعتبر عملية فهم الأحداث القاسية عاملاً محدّداً رئيسيّاً للتكيّف النفسي مع الصدمات. بالاستعانة بنموذج بارك (2010) المتكامل لصنع المعنى، كان الهدف الرئيسي لهذه الرسالة هو البحث في تجارب صنع المعنى عند اللاجئين السوريين المعاد توطينهم وكذلك تأثير تلك التجارب على التكيّف بعد الصدمة. بغرض تحقيق هذه الغاية، قمنا بإجراء دراسة مقطعيّة متعددة الأساليب ذات مرحلتين من جمع البيانات وعينتين مستقلتين. شارك ما مجموعه 44 من البالغين السوريين المتعرضين للحرب والذين يعيشون في المجتمعات الحضريّة في جميع أنحاء البرتغال القاريّة في مجموعات التركيز للمرحلة الأولى (العدد = 2 ؛ 5 مشاركين) والمرحلة الثانية من المقابلات الفرديّة (العدد = 39). وصف النتائج التجريبيّة موجود في الفصول من 3 إلى 7. النتائج الرئيسيّة تظهر: (1) التعرض لأحداث كبيرة تحطّم المعنى قبل وأثناء وبعد رحلة الهروب. (2) مركزيّة المعاني العالميّة قبل الحرب المتعلقة بالهويّة، العدالة، السيطرة، الله، توقعات الحياة الطبيعيّة، سلامة الأسرة والبلد، والسّلام لتقييم الحرب والهجرة القسريّة؛ (3) التقييمات الظرفيّة التي تعمل كعمليات داخليّة وخارجيّة خاضعة لإعادة النظر مع الصّدمات الجديدة، المعلومات الجديدة، الوقت، والسياق؛ (4) الانتهاكات الفوريّة و التدريجيّة المتعلقة بالمعنى المعرفي؛ (5) محددات البحث عن المعنى بما في ذلك الضغوطات التراكميّة، توافر الموارد المعرفيّة ، مرحلة النزوح، الدعم الاجتماعي، استراتيجيات التأقلم، والعمر التنموي؛ (6) المعاني السلبيّة والإيجابيّة والمتناقضة وغير المحلولة الناتجة عن الصدمة؛ و (7) التكيّف النفسي لصدمات اللاجئين كسلسلة مستمرة من الاستجابات من الضيق إلى تصورات النمو. تشير النتائج إلى أنّ صنع المعنى لصدمات اللاجئين يستلزم مجموعة من المسارات المتزامنة والديناميكيّة والمعرفيّة المحددة التي يتم تحديدها حسب المكان والسياق الاجتماعي والسياسي، وبالتالي عرضة لإعادة النظر فيها بشكل متكرر. تتحدى النتائج أيضاً مفهوم التكيّف النفسي الناجح للصدمة كحالة نهائيّة. يسلّط هذا العمل الضوء على الحاجة إلى تعزيز صنع المعنى التكيفي كتجربة متكاملة والتي تعطي الأولويّة لإصلاح المعاني التي تتحداها الحرب بشدّة، بما في ذلك الإحساس بالعدالة، الانتماء، والسيطرة، فضلاً عن إمكانيّة توافر مستقبل سالم وآمن.

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Introduction

INTRODUCTION

Eleven years after it started as a peaceful uprising, the Syrian war remains the source of the largest refugee crisis of our time (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2021). More than 13 million civilians have fled their homes following exposure to a brutal conflict that has left hundreds of thousands of people dead and torn apart families, communities, and country. As survivors of the refugee experience, Syrians refugees have reported exposure to diverse types of trauma, harrowing migration journeys, and repeated displacements in light of shifting battle frontlines and the protracted nature of the war (Ben Farhat et al., 2018; Hassan et al., 2015; Khamis, 2019). These extreme life circumstances reinforce the uprootedness of the refugee experience, have the potential to violate refugees' assumptions about themselves, the world, and their place in the world (ter Heide et al., 2017), and to cause significant long-term psychological distress (Bogic et al., 2015). Yet, despite the extreme nature of war and refugee trauma, a growing body of literature has suggested that refugees also experience positive psychological adjustment and perceive benefits from trauma (Chan et al., 2016; Modesti & Talamo, 2021).

The trauma recovery literature posits that, when faced with a highly stressful event that is perceived as discrepant from one's worldviews or global meaning structures, individuals engage in meaning-making efforts aimed at reframing the traumatic event in order to fit previous beliefs or at rebuilding shattered meanings in order to reduce distress (Park, 2010; Sherrer, 2011; Taylor, 1983). Psychological adjustment is thus achieved through cognitive reappraisal processes that enable individuals to return to or exceed previous levels of psychological functioning.

Thus far, the empirical research on the role of meaning-making in psychological adjustment has not only lagged behind the rich Western-based theoretical advances, but also been largely focused on specific components of meaning-making in Western survivors of single-incidence personal events (Cloitre, 2009; Park, 2010). Despite being disproportionately affected by potentially meaning-shattering events, it remains unclear how non-Western refugee populations make meaning of complex trauma and perceive psychological benefits and growth from their experiences.

To help close this gap, in 2017, we designed a cross-sectional mixed-methods study, "Journeys in Meaning" (JiM), guided by Park's (2010) integrated meaning-making model that aimed to examine the meaning-making trajectories of Syrian refugees and the

impact of those trajectories on psychological adjustment in resettlement (Principal Objective). The sample included 44 Syrian war-exposed adults recently-arrived to Portugal through four refugee streams (resettlement, relocation, spontaneous asylum applicants, and higher education programs for refugees) and included two phases of data collection with independent samples: Focus Groups (Phase 1) and individual interviews (Phase 2).

The present dissertation is organized in seven chapters. The present chapter begins by providing a general background and theoretical framework supporting our research objectives. The general background is organized in three sections: refugee experience, determinants of refugee mental health, and theoretical models of psychological adjustment to trauma. The second part of the chapter describes JiM's objectives, design, and method. Chapters 2 through 7 are based on published or submitted articles. Chapter 2 presents a brief literature review of empirical studies with refugee populations that focus on different aspects of meaning-making processes, and the following chapters (Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7) are based on six empirical articles that make specific contributions towards achieving the study's objectives.

The last chapter (Chapter 8) provides a summary and integrated discussion of the main findings, including this work's contribution for theory and practice, and makes recommendations for future research, clinical practice and policy.

GENERAL BACKGROUND

The Refugee Experience

The refugee experience is characterized by exposure to cumulative, extreme, community-impacting trauma, and significant losses and additional stressors pre-, during, and post-flight (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010; Porter & Haslam, 2005; Schubert & Punamaki, 2011). Persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, and social group, war, torture, and other forms of collective and/or community-impacting violence trigger migration processes in search of safety, often many years after the onset of violence (McAdam, 2005). The majority of the world's 34.4 million people displaced across international borders (*i.e.*, refugees and asylum-seekers) have sought protection in neighboring countries, with only a minority of these individuals – an estimated 5 million – being able to reach third countries of resettlement in the West (UNHCR, 2021), either on their own, often following dangerous sea or desert crossings, as asylum-seekers, or through resettlement programs, where they are flown from first asylum countries in the hope of rebuilding their lives in resettlement. However, in these post-migration settings, which are seldom of their choosing, refugees and asylum-seekers face significant daily hardships associated with the challenges of integration (Hynie, 2018; Phillimore, 2020). Despite having access to initial assistance through state-sponsored integration programs, refugees face particular challenges related to the forced nature of their experience and the impossibility of return to their homeland that reinforce their sense of loss, the uprootedness of their life experience, and the sense of discontinuity from their past lives, which negatively impact their mental health (Schick et al., 2016; Sorgen, 2015; Strang & Quinn, 2019).

Syrian War (2011-present)

In March 2011, inspired by a wave of pro-democracy demonstrations across the Arab world, peaceful protests erupted across several Syrian cities denouncing President Assad's authoritarian regime and demanding democratic reforms (Yacoubian, 2021). The government responded with brutal violence, killing, imprisoning, and torturing demonstrators, and, by 2012, what began as a peaceful uprising, had escalated into a full-fledged civil war where war crimes and crimes against humanity abounded, and included indiscriminate bombings, use of chemical weapons, massacres, and enforced sieges that effectively deprived civilians of basic necessities (Laub, 2021).

As Syria descended into chaos, by 2014 radical Islamist groups had conquered large portions of the territory, which prompted the military intervention of the United States and its allies to support depleted opposition forces and defeat the Islamic State, and of Russia and Iran to back Syrian government forces (Council on Foreign Relations [CFR], 2022; World Politics Review [WPR], 2022). With the Islamic State's retreat and as the Syrian army progressively recaptured and consolidated control over most of the country, by the end of 2018 the conflict had turned in Assad's favor and appeared to be drawing to a close. And yet, as the conflict enters its eleventh year, significant areas in the northern part of the country remain outside the control of the regime and are prone to surges of high-intensity fighting that keep generating new waves of refugees and effectively delay peace and rebuilding prospects, as well as the ability of those who fled to return home (Al-Jazeera, 2021; WPR, 2022).

Mass Displacement

The humanitarian cost of the Syrian war has been devastating. More than 60% of the country's pre-war population has been forced to flee their homes and been repeatedly displaced as battle frontlines shifted and regional geopolitics dictated the flow of mass displacements (Hassan et al., 2015). In addition to the 6.7 million refugees who sought protection across international borders, there are still 6.8 million civilians displaced inside the country, approximately 900,000 of whom were forced out of their homes in early 2020 alone following the battle over the northwestern Idlib province, when the war had supposedly been drawn to a close (UNHCR, 2021; WPR, 2022). Most death toll estimates set the number of Syrian civilians and fighters killed since the beginning of the war at 500,000 (EASO, 2021). Eighty percent of Syrians now live below the poverty line of USD $1.90 per day and face unprecedented hunger levels, and the social, economic, and educational crisis continues to worsen (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2021), which dims prospects of recovery and inhibits the ability to rebuild the country.

The large majority of Syrian refugees have remained in the neighboring countries of Turkey – which, alone, hosts 3.7 million Syrians –, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq (UNHCR, 2022) where they have stayed with uncertain legal status and lacked integration prospects for themselves and their families (Arenliu et al., 2020). Unable to return to Syria and pushed-out by harsh living circumstances, a minority of these refugees

have periodically attempted difficult migration journeys to Europe by land and sea, along with masses of other refugees fleeing war and violence in their countries, generating waves of arrivals of people desperate for safety, peace, and a chance to rebuild their lives (Ben Farhat et al., 2018). In 2015-2016, refugee arrivals at the borders of the European Union peaked at more than 1.2 million refugees per year, a 218% increase from 2014, largely following perilous Mediterranean crossings into Italy and Greece (Eurostat, 2016). This so-called "refugee crisis" required concerted efforts at the European level through a newly-created relocation scheme that removed willing asylum-seekers from the dire conditions at the ports of entry in Italian and Greek islands and relocated them to EU countries willing to host refugees, provide initial state- and EU-sponsored assistance, and promote their integration (European Commission [EC], 2021).

Syria has consistently been the largest refugee source country to the European Union, since 2013 (EC, 2021). Over 1 million Syrians have sought protection across the European territory, with Germany and Sweden, two common refugee destination countries, hosting 70% of Syrians (UNHCR, 2022). Arriving Syrian refugees have reported repeat exposure to massive human rights violations, torture, war crimes, compounded daily stressors of living in a war-torn country, death and disappearance of loved ones, loss of property, documentation, life savings, as well as interrupted education and career paths (Arenliu et al., 2020; Ben Farhat et al., 2018; Hassan et al., 2015). Additionally, the protracted armed conflict created deep divisions along religious and ethnic lines that profoundly shattered beliefs about community and country, and have led to significant inter-group suspicion and identity loss in displaced Syrians (Smeekes et al., 2017; Zeno, 2017).

Syrian Refugees in Portugal

Portugal, a small country of 10 million people on the southwestern border of Europe, is not a preferred refugee destination country (Oliveira, 2021). In 2007, Portugal made its first commitment with the UNHCR to host up to 30 refugees resettled from first asylum countries, having hosted, by the end of 2015, 203 persons. As one of the EU's poorest countries, it has also not been an attractive destination for asylum-seekers who, in 2015, at the height of refugee arrivals to Europe, filed 896 applications for international protection, albeit it representing a 100% increase from the previous year (Serviço de Estrangeiros e Fronteiras [SEF], 2016). Despite these symbolic numbers, the Portuguese government, in coordination with local governments, resettlement agencies, and civil

society alike, has made a concerted effort to prioritize refugee reception and integration policies, and devised a national, multidisciplinary, decentralized strategy to host refugees in urban and rural communities across the territory (Oliveira, 2021; Pereira, 2021; Sousa, 2021).

Between 2015 and 2017, Syrian refugees arriving through different protection mechanisms constituted the largest protected group, which peaked in 2017 at 416 Syrian nationals being granted asylum by the Portuguese Government (Oliveira, 2021). In addition to providing initial refugee assistance that varied between 6 and 18 months to Syrians arriving as relocated asylum-seekers from Greece and Italy, resettled refugees from Egypt and Turkey, and spontaneous asylum-seekers (Sousa, 2021), the Portuguese government offered full scholarships to Syrian graduate and undergraduate refugees whose education had been interrupted by the war. At the height of the Syrian war the Global Platform for Syrian Students (GP4SYS) provided an important pathway to safety for higher education students who, in March 2014, began being periodically flown from Beirut to Lisbon, given student visas, and placed at universities across the country. Since then, the GP4SYS has expanded its model and provided 650 scholarships to graduate and undergraduate student refugees in 13 countries (GP4SYS, 2020).

Despite their best efforts, hosting Arabic-speaking, largely Muslim, Middle Eastern refugees in a country with little refugee hosting experience posed significant challenges to resettlement and governmental agencies. Challenges related to the arriving communities' shared history and traumatic past and to culturally-informed idioms of distress called for evidence-based knowledge of the needs of those individuals and communities that could inform intervention strategies and policies (Pereira, 2021).

Determinants of Refugee Mental Health

Extreme pre-migration stressors have been extensively documented as key predictors of mental health outcomes in survivors of refugee trauma, often many years after arrival in resettlement[1] (Bogic et al., 2015). Refugees report high incidence of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as the main psychopathology associated with the refugee experience, which is often co-morbid with depression and anxiety (Ghumman et al., 2016; Heeren et al., 2014; Richards et al., 2011; Slewa-Younan et al., 2015), prolonged grief (Kovras & Robins, 2016; Nickerson et al., 2014; Renner et al., 2021), as

[1] Resettlement is used throughout this dissertation to refer to a post-migration setting, regardless of refugee legal status or pathways to safety, unless otherwise specified.

well as culturally-informed somatic complaints (Borho et al., 2021; Zbidat et al., 2020). Systematic literature reviews and meta-analyses have consistently denounced the high variability of prevalence rates of distress across studies and population samples (Bogic & Priebe, 2015; Ghumman et al., 2016; Lindert et al., 2009; Porter & Haslam, 2005; Silove et al., 2017; Slewa-Younan et al., 2015; Steel et al., 2009). This heterogeneity has been suggested to derive from lack of methodological rigor, socio-demographic factors, displacement setting, length of exposure to and types of trauma, lack of incorporation of culture into study design and instruments, or even to the application of Western conceptualizations of mental disorders to the fundamentally different populations. Despite these discrepancies and the fluid boundaries between normative and maladaptive responses to refugee trauma, growing points of convergence in the literature indicate the need to distinguish and address the needs of specific subgroups according to their characteristics, context, and life circumstances (Silove et al., 2017), as well as to focus on the internal, relational and contextual factors that facilitate positive psychological adjustment (Cobb et al., 2019).

Over the past decade, the refugee trauma literature has evolved towards expanding the determinants of refugee mental health beyond an exclusive pre-migration trauma exposure model towards what Miller & Rasmussen (2017) call an “ecological model of refugee distress” that considers the effects of exposure to a breath of ongoing displacement-related stressors, such as social isolation, unemployment, poverty, lack of access to basic resources, perceived discrimination, or uncertain legal status, on the mental health of refugees and asylum-seekers. These persistent post-migration stressors, which are related to the social, political, and economic conditions of the receiving country, have systematically been found to moderate the effects of previous traumatic events (Bogic et al., 2015; Miller & Rasmussen, 2010; Willis et al., 2015) and to significantly impact refugees’ ability to successfully integrate into their new communities and lead healthy and hopeful lives (Hynie, 2018; Schick et al., 2016). Two other important developments have included: moving beyond a pathological model of the refugee experience to one that considers the psychological distress experienced by forcibly-displaced persons as a normal reaction to abnormal life circumstances that suggest a need for cognitive-emotional processing (Hussain & Bushan, 2011; Goodkind et al., 2020); and a strengths- and resilience-based model that recognizes refugees’ ability to concurrently perceive psychological benefits from their past experiences (Sleijpen et

al., 2013). These benefits are expected to result from the struggle to make sense of and integrate the trauma into a coherent life narrative (Levy-Gigi et al., 2016) that, when successful, can lead to perceived Posttraumatic Growth (PTG; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). In the emergent refugee trauma recovery literature, sociodemographic factors, level of trauma, social support, coping strategies, religiosity, and hope have been identified as key predictors of PTG in refugees, albeit with disparate and sometimes conflicting results (Chan et al., 2016). Yet, the mechanisms that facilitate or impede positive psychological changes that characterize PTG remain unknown in refugee populations.

Psychological Adjustment to Trauma

Definition of Trauma

The American Psychiatric Association (APA) defines trauma as an event that involves direct or indirect experiences of “actual or threatened death or serious injury” that can lead to clinically-significant and persistent negative changes to cognitions, feelings, and behavior (APA, 2013). Prototypical events like war, torture, or rape are expected to cause intense fear, helplessness and horror (APA, 1994), and thus threaten trauma survivors’ psychological and emotional safety, and mark a major discontinuity in their lives (Larsen & Pacella, 2016; Friedman et al., 2011). Following such objectively-adverse events, individuals can experience intrusive recollections of the trauma, exhibit avoidance behavior, perceive changes in arousal and reactivity, as well as negative alterations to cognitions and mood; if persistent over time, these symptoms can cause significant functional impairment and lead to a diagnosis of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD; APA, 2013; Boals, 2018; Friedman et al., 2011). Although most trauma survivors are able to regain normal psychological functioning after a period of acute posttraumatic distress (Taylor, 1983), it is the persistence of such symptoms of that characterizes the pathological nature of PTSD (Friedman et al., 2011).

Trauma researchers have long debated how to best define and operationalize trauma. Traditional conceptualizations of PTSD as the main psychopathology associated with traumatic experiences have focused on fear- and anxiety-based responses that drive and maintain maladaptive responses to extreme events (Larsen & Pacella, 2016). However, not only do survivors exhibit a breath of other negative emotional, cognitive, and behavioral changes, but they do so in response to events that have less objective

severity but which they perceive as psychologically threatening (*e.g.*, cancer, unemployment, discrimination, or post-migration daily stressors; Hyland et al., 2021; Larsen & Pacella, 2016; Steel et al., 2009; Unseld et al., 2019).

Over the past 20 years, significant strides have been made in the trauma literature towards reconciling objective trauma exposure as defined in the DSM (Friedman et al., 2011) and the subjective experience of traumatization (Boals, 2018). The latter points to the importance of event centrality and of extent of perceived threat to one's survival and identity (Larsen & Berenbaum, 2017) to more adequately defining what may be construed as traumatizing, over objective criteria such as the severity of trauma and number of exposures (Boals, 2018; Hyland et al., 2021; Larsen & Berenbaum, 2017). This means that events that would be considered as objectively traumatizing may not be subjectively perceived as such. Take torture, for example, which the European Court of Human Rights defines as "deliberate and inhuman treatment causing very serious and cruel suffering," capable of degrading, humiliating, and breaking one's dignity (1978). In a highly cited study with torture survivors living in Turkey, Başoğlu and colleagues (1997) found that, political activists who were psychologically prepared for the possibility of imprisonment and torture as a result of their activities exhibited lower psychopathology than their non-activist counterparts. Therefore, differences in how the PTE is individually appraised (*i.e.*, personal meaning) appear to dictate posttraumatic reactions, which emphasizes the role of negative appraisals in maintaining poor mental health outcomes, including PTSD, by sustaining a sense of current threat (Foa, 1999). The increased emphasis on posttraumatic negative – and thus distressing – appraisals and away from an exclusive focus on terror-inducing events, has had significant implications for theory, research, and practice (Larsen & Pacella, 2016), namely for understanding the mechanisms that promote trauma recovery.

Theoretical Models of Psychological Adjustment to Trauma

The ability to find meaning in life's most adverse experiences has long been theorized as playing a critical role in successful posttraumatic adjustment. This hypothesis was first advanced in 1963 by Victor Frankl, who, based on his experience as a survivor of the Holocaust, contended that the search for meaning not only serves as a primary human motivation, but also has the potential to facilitate individuals' ability to overcome the most extreme and horrific events (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006). In essence, this search for meaning entails an effort to understand why the event happened and the impact it has

on one's life. Since then, numerous theorists have proposed models of psychological adjustment to highly stressful events, overwhelmingly in the context of direct personal traumas (Updegraff et al., 2008), that center on cognitive-emotional processing and on the potential for stress-related growth (Park et al., 2012).

Cognitive and emotional processing psychological adjustment theories generally contend the existence of cognitive structures (e.g., orienting systems, worldviews, assumptions, global meaning) that provide individuals a lens through which to interpret their experiences and which give their lives' a sense of predictability and control (Park et al., 2012). Examples of such theoretical models include Taylor's (1983) theory of cognitive adaptation. Following exposure to psychologically-threatening events, Taylor contended that individuals respond with cognitive adaptive efforts based on search for meaning, attempts to regain mastery and to restore self-esteem that, when successful, allow them to restore or exceed previous psychological functioning. These efforts are in large part based on positive cognitive illusions individuals have about themselves and the world, which can serve a protective function, but which are vulnerable to disconfirmation when the traumas individuals face are prolonged and not prone to problem-solving (Helgeson, 2003).

Folkman and Lazarus (1985) proposed the essence of psychological adjustment to lay on two concurrent elements: structure and process. As such, their 1984 transactional stress and coping model focused on cognitive appraisals of a stressful event, which were informed by stable factors such as personality traits, cognitive structures, and static features of the environment (i.e., structure), and the cognitive and behavioral efforts employed by individuals to manage the demands of such event and the changes to its meaning or significance (i.e., process). Structure and process are then posited to determine psychological adjustment outcomes (Pais-Ribeiro et al., 2010). Janoff-Bulman (1989), on the other hand, proposed a shattered assumptions theory centered on the ability of traumatic events to challenge individuals' basic assumptions (i.e., schemas) about the self and the world, namely concerning self-worth, competence, justice, benevolence, and predictability, which can be rebuilt and modified over time. Its central premise is thus that the perceived shattering of individuals' assumptions or worldviews cause trauma symptoms and that such distress drives efforts to reconstruct shattering worldviews (Edmondson et al., 2011). Sense of coherence was posited by Antonovksy (1987) to play a central role in individuals' ability to find positive meaning in aftermath of trauma by

providing the resources to make stressors comprehensible, manageable and meaningful, and has been found to be a significant predictor of positive psychological adjustment, namely happiness, self-esteem, general well-being, and quality of life (Ying & Akutsu, 1997). Foa and colleages' emotional processing theory highlighted the ability of trauma to violate individuals' core beliefs and to activate fear networks and importantly stressed the vulnerability of individuals with rigid belief systems to maladaptive cognitive and behavioral posttraumatic responses as well as the role of sustained negative appraisals in maintaining distress (Foa et al., 1999; Park et al., 2012). Lastly, Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) focused on the positive changes individuals experience as a result of struggling with trauma, and proposed the construct of posttraumatic growth (PTG). The authors' model is built on the assumption that major life crisis or traumas or stressful events can present significant challenges to one's core cognitive structures and that subsequent attempts at psychological survival may result in PTG, which can be perceived through greater appreciation for life, increased intimacy and personal strength, new life possibilities, and spiritual development (i.e., PTG domains). Key aspects of the model include the need for preexisting schemas to be significantly shattered, the possibility of posttraumatic distress to coexist with perceived growth, and the concept that it is not the traumatic event that causes PTG but rather the cognitive processing triggered by the event.

The Meaning-Making Model

In her work investigating coping and pathways to psychological adjustment in the context of adversity, Park focused on issues of meaning and proposed an integrated meaning-making model (2010) that emphasizes the importance of the appraisals of the event – and not just of the event's impact on one's orienting systems – and the dynamic nature of meaning-making (Park, 2005; Park, 2017). Park's model built on the work of previous theorists, namely on her work with Folkman (Park & Folkman, 1997), and on consensus around the following tenets: people possess global meaning structures (i.e., orienting systems, schemas, assumptions, worldviews, or core beliefs) through which they interpret their experiences; when faced with an adverse event, they assign meaning to it (i.e., situational meaning); if perceived as discrepant from preexisting global meaning, the extent of the discrepancy determines the extent of perceived distress; this distress then triggers a meaning-making process aimed at restoring previous core beliefs; lastly, if successful, this process is expected to lead to better adjustment (Park, 2010).

Based on these tenets, the meaning-making model offered potential pathways for cognitive processing that rested on four key elements: global meaning; situational meaning; meaning-making processes; and meanings-made. Each element is described briefly below and Figure 1 includes Park's proposed model (2010, p. 258).

All individuals possess global meaning structures composed of: broad views about justice, safety, control, predictability, or coherence – "global beliefs" – that offer a lens through which to interpret the world and their experience; aspirations, values, and desired outcomes for their lives – "global goals" – regarding relationships, career, and other achievements; and a subjective "sense of meaning or purpose" that is informed by their global goals and beliefs. Situational meaning describes a dynamic set of processes and outcomes focused on assigning meaning to a potentially-stressful event that includes determining the extent to which the event is controllable, the reason why it occurred, and its implications for one's life. Situational appraisals that are perceived as discrepant from preexisting global meaning (i.e., able to shatter or violate global beliefs and goals) are expected to generate distress, which triggers meaning-making processes. The need to find comprehensibility and significance in the aftermath of trauma (i.e., search for meaning) triggers a complex set of cognitive and emotional processes, including coping, that are not only intrinsic to the individual but also relational, since meaning-making occurs in the context of family, community, and culture (Park et al., 2017). The end-result of those processes are designated as meanings-made and refer to the changes occurred as a result of meaning-making, and can include changed or restored global beliefs, goals, and sense of purpose, reappraised meaning of the event, causal reattributions, acceptance, or perceived growth and positive life changes.

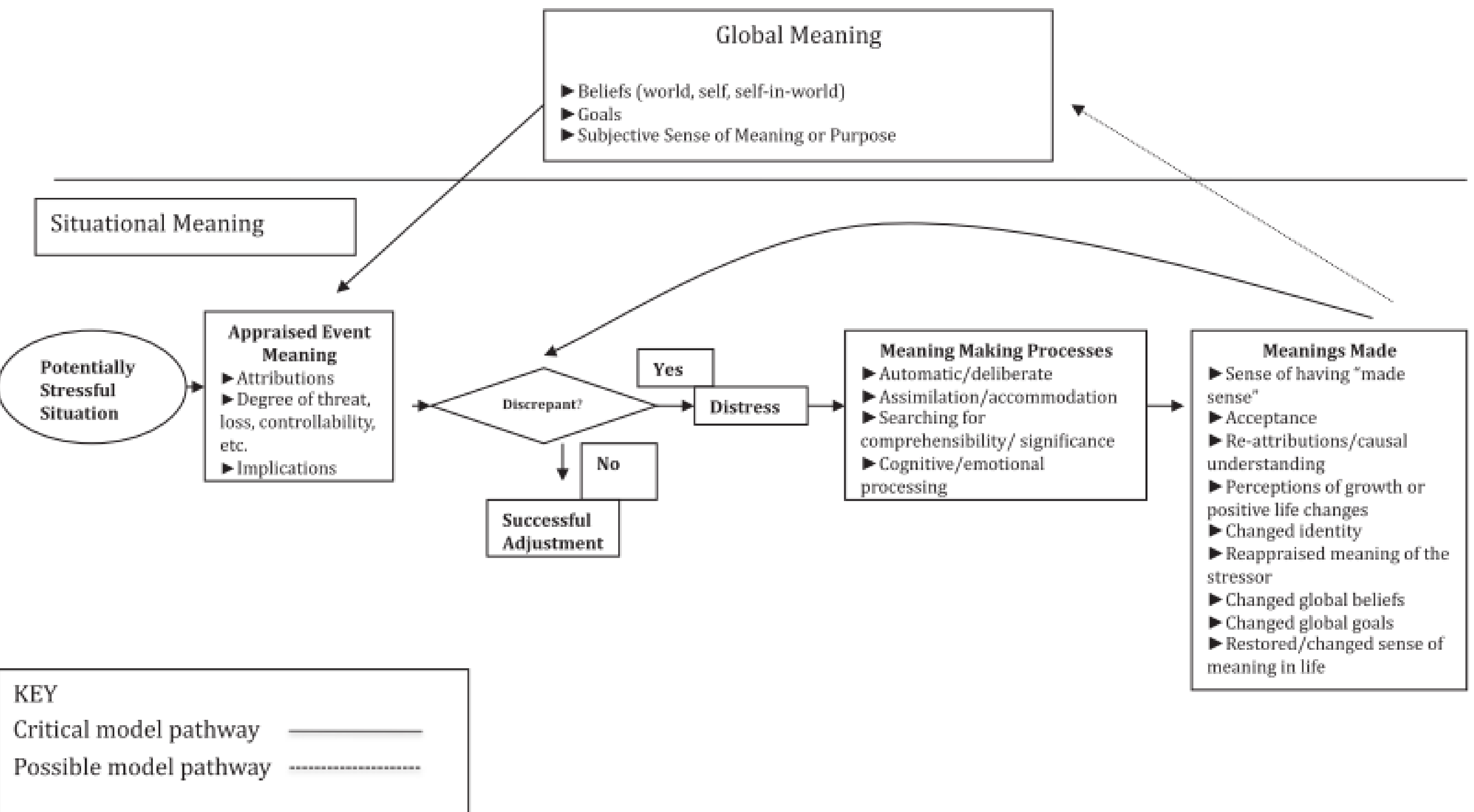

Figure 1. The meaning-making model.

Meaning-Making in the Aftermath of Refugee Trauma

Park's (2010) meaning-making model was conceptualized based on Western models of recovery from events subjectively perceived as threatening to individuals' orienting systems, but that are objectively different in the level of violence, degree of exposure, and expected terror induced by refugee trauma. However, because the model offers a comprehensive and sufficiently flexible framework for trajectories of trauma recovery, its applicability to survivors of the refugee experience requires in-depth inquiry.

The emerging literature on meaning-making in the aftermath of refugee trauma has largely focused on investigating the role specific elements or processes play in psychological adjustment (see Chapter 2 for a review), namely: coping strategies (Huijts et al., 2012), narrative styles (Henrickson et al., 2013; Puvimanasinghe et al., 2014); religious meaning-making (Skalisky et al., 2020; Tuval-Mashiach & Dekel, 2014); or presence of meaning (Toussaint et al., 2017). Although promising and suggestive of potential applicability of the theoretical model to survivors of refugee trauma, it is crucial to investigate meaning-making as an integrated experience, prone to being revisited throughout forced displacement trajectories, and informed by culture and community.

Study Objectives and Hypotheses

Given the centrality of meaning-making to posttraumatic psychological adjustment, the study Journeys in Meaning (JiM) aimed to investigate the integrated meaning-making processes of Syrian refugees and the impact of those processes on psychological adjustment in resettlement (Principal Objective). To that end, the first step entailed evaluating the conceptual equivalence and applicability of the meaning-making model to Syrian survivors of refugee trauma (Objective 1). Specific JiM objectives were subsequently to: explore the content of Syrian's global meaning (Objective 2); examine exposure to potentially meaning-defying events and associated psychological distress (Objective 3); assessing global meaning violations (Objective 4); investigate meaning-making trajectories by exploring narrative accounts of meaning-making processes, including search for meaning, cognitive and emotional processing, and meanings-made of trauma (Objective 5); identify collectively- and culturally-informed meaning-making trajectories (Objective 6); and assess adaptive meaning-making outcomes (Objective 7). We further posited that: type of predisplacement trauma would differentially violate specific meaning cognitions; refugees would engage in meaning-making attempts throughout their displacement journeys; and that not all attempts to make meaning would be growth-promoting.

Study Design

To meet the aforementioned objectives, we designed a mixed-methods cross-sectional study with an exploratory sequential design (Fetters et al., 2013) and an emphasis on qualitative methodology to elicit exploratory research on meaning-making cognitions. The study included two independent samples of war-exposed Syrians adults and comprised two phases of data collection: Phase 1 Focus Groups (n = 2) aimed at determining the applicability of the meaning-making model and related psychological constructs to the target population, and testing face validity of the Arabic-language research protocol (Ekblad & Bäärnhielm, 2002); and, subsequent to Phase 1 findings (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008), Phase 2 Individual Interviews (n = 39) aimed at exploring individual accounts of cultural- and trauma-informed integrated meaning-making experiences.

Method

Participants and Procedures

Participants were Syrian adults recruited among Syrian refugee and war-affected communities in Portugal, using a combination of convenience and snowball sampling. Outreach was done in close consultation with resettlement agencies and community-based organizations through interpreter-facilitated information sessions and distribution of Arabic-language study materials on social media. Inclusion criteria included: (1) Syrian nationality or background, (2) +18 years old, (3) Arabic speaker with Portuguese or English fluency, (4) living in Portugal for a minimum of six months, and (5) able to provide informed consent. A total of 44 Syrians participated in the study. Table 1 at the end of this section contains participants' detailed sociodemographic information.

Four women and one man participated in two small FGs held in Lisbon between October and December 2018, with two and three participants each. Participants were resettled refugees (n = 2) and relocated asylum-seekers (n = 3) averaging 37 years in age (M = 37.4, SD = 12.2). FGs were conducted in the offices of community organizations and assisted by Arabic language interpreters. Participants were distributed paper versions of the questionnaires to fill out individually, which was followed by a group discussion to investigate shared and culturally-informed understandings of the psychological constructs under study. The group discussions were audio recorded and FGs had a 90-minute duration each.

Between January and May 2019, 21 men and 19 women participated in 40 Phase 2 individual interviews conducted in six districts across the country. One man became distressed during the interview and dropped out of the study. The final Phase 2 sample thus consisted of 39 individuals between the ages of 19 and 37 (M = 27.1, SD = 4.8), close to 80% (n = 31) of whom were beneficiaries of higher education programs for refugees (*i.e.*, student-refugees) such as the Portuguese Global Platform for Syrian Students. The remaining eight individuals were relocated refugees (n = 5) and spontaneous asylum-seekers (n = 3). Phase 2 interviews were held in the districts of Braga and Oporto (n = 14) in the north, Évora (n = 1) in the south, and Aveiro, Coimbra, and Lisbon (n = 18) in central Portugal. Participants and researcher met in quiet spaces of participants' convenience and interviews last 90 minutes on average. Due to concerns related to confidentiality and anonymity expressed during Phase 1 recruitment, individual interviews were conducted without the presence of an interpreter, in English or

Portuguese, according to participant preference. All study materials were available in Arabic, as well as English and Portuguese, to ensure consistency of language, and questionnaires were administered as structured interviews.

All participants were informed of the purpose of the study, of the voluntary nature of their partaking, and guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality of their information, in writing in their native language. Due to the sensitive and potentially-retraumatizing content of the material discussed, participants were briefed and debriefed on normal reactions to the retelling of their stories (Makhoul et al., 2018) and, if needed, offered the possibility of referral for pro-bono psychosocial support. The author conducted all FGs and individual interviews, and the study received ISPA – Instituto Universitário's Ethics Committee (Ref. D/004/09/2018).

Table 1

Sociodemographic Indicators and Trauma Exposure (n = 44)

Variables	Phase 1 (n = 5)		Phase 2 (n = 39)	
	n or *M*	% or *SD*	*n* or *M*	% or *SD*
Gender				
Man	1	20.0	20	51.3
Woman	4	80.0	19	48.7
Age	*37.4*	*12.2*	*27.1*	*4.8*
Marital Status				
Single	0	0.0	34	87.2
Married/Partnered	4	80.0	5	12.8
Widowed	1	20.0	0	0.0
Ethnicity				
Arab	4	80.0	34	87.2
Arab-Palestinian	1	20.0	1	2.5
Kurdish	0	0.0	1	2.5
Armenian	0	0.0	2	5.1
Greek	0	0.0	1	2.5
Religious background				
Muslim				
Sunni	5	1	16	41.0
Alawite	0	0.0	7	17.9
Ismaili	0	0.0	2	5.1
Other/non specific	0	0.0	8	20.5
Christian				
Catholic	0	0.0	2	5.1
Orthodox	0	0.0	2	5.1
Druze	0	0.0	2	5.1
Education				
Basic school (6th grade)	1	20.0	0	0.0
Middle school (9th grade)	1	20.0	0	0.0
Secondary school (12th grade)	2	40.0	6	15.4
Associate’s degree/ unfinished bachelors	1	20.0	2	5.1
Bachelor’s degree	0	0.0	18	46.1
Master’s degree	0	0.0	11	28.2
Doctoral degree	0	0.0	2	5.1
Time (months) since leaving Syria	*55.6*	*25.9*	*41.6*	*28.5*
Time (months) since arrival in Portugal	*27.8*	*7.3*	*32.7*	*20.7*
Employment status				
Full-time (including FT scholarships)	2	40.0	38	97.4
Part-time	0	0.0	1	0.0
Unemployed	3	60.0	0	0.0
Legal status on arrival				
Refugee or Asylum-seeker	5	100.0	8	20.5
Student Visa	0	0.0	31	79.5

M = Mean; *SD = Standard Deviance*

Materials

The study protocol was designed in English in consultation with a multidisciplinary Expert Committee with proficiency in Arabic, Arab and Syrian cultures, content and constructs under study, and psychometrics, and it was subsequently translated and back-translated into Arabic. The protocol included six Arabic-language documents: (1) information to participants to be provided at the beginning of the FG/individual interview with a description of study procedures, research team, clarification of role of researcher, participant's rights, confidentiality, risks and benefits; (2) consent form to be signed and dated by each participant; (3) sociodemographic questionnaire constructed for the purposes of the study and designed to collect key determinants of refugee mental health, including gender, formal education, employment, or legal status (Kim & Kim, 2014; Renner et al., 2020); (4) the Arabic Version of the Harvard Trauma Questionnaire (HTQ; Shoeb et al., 2007); (5) the Global Meaning Violations Scale (GMVS; Park et al., 2016), which we adapted for use with Arabic speaking refugee populations (GMVS-ArabV) to assess violations of core belief and goal; and (6) a semi-structured interview guide designed for the purposes of the study with open-ended questions to elicit refugees' pre- and postwar meaning-making experiences, the processes' outputs and outcomes. Appendix 1 contains the English or English/Arabic versions of these documents. Chapter 3 includes a detailed description of the research protocol and Chapter 5 details the cross-cultural adaptation of the GMVS-ArabV, according to International Test Commission (ITC, 2018) guidelines.

Trauma and Psychological Distress

The HTQ was designed to capture complex trauma exposure in refugee populations as well as population-specific idioms of distress (e.g., item 42, part 4, HTQ Arabic version reads, "*Qalbak maqboud* – sensation of the heart being squeezed"), and is the most consistently used refugee trauma measure (Sigvardsdotter et al., 2016). HTQ Parts 1 – Trauma Events checklist (43 items) and 5 – Torture History (34 items) were used to assess incidence of pre-resettlement PTEs through yes/ no answers, and Part 4 – Trauma Symptoms scale (45 items) to assess presence of symptoms in the previous two weeks through an ordinal scale. Individuals with a DSM-IV score (Items 1-16) above the recommended cut-off of 2.5 were considered symptomatic for PTSD. Outputs were quantitative: trauma and torture exposure (to provide a trauma-informed picture of the sample and baseline for shattered meanings) and PTSD.

Meaning Violations

Perceived violations of participants' core beliefs (5 items) and life goals (8 items) in relation to "the events that led you to leave your country" as the index stressful experience were assessed using the cross-culturally adapted GMVS-ArabV. During Phase 1 testing the GMVS-ArabV was self-administered and in Phase 2 it was used as a structured interview to access complex cognitions. Outputs were: quantitative – belief and goal violations and GMVS-ArabV validity evidence based on internal structure – and qualitative – GMVS-ArabV validity evidence based on content and suitability for target population.

Meaning-Making and Perceived Psychological Adjustment

Participants narrated their pre- and posttraumatic meaning-making trajectories in relation to the war and/or specific events that violated specific beliefs, goals, and sense of purpose. Outputs were qualitative: pre- and postwar stressors and distress; content of pre- and postwar global meaning structures; intra- and interpersonal meaning-making processes, including appraised meanings of PTEs, search for meaning, cognitive reappraisals processes, and meanings-made of trauma; and perceived psychological growth or distress.

Data analysis

Quantitative Data

Descriptive statistics were used to: characterize the sample across all articles, assess trauma exposure and PTSD symptoms (Objective 3 – Chapter 4), measure global meaning violations (Objective 4 – Chapter 5), and examine GMVS-ArabV statistical and psychometric properties (Objective 4 – Chapter 5). Quantitative data analysis was conducted using *R* statistical programing language (R Core Team, 2021) and $\alpha = .05$ was considered statistically significant.

Qualitative Data

Phase 1 and Phase 2 audio recordings were transcribed and participants' names were removed and coded. The data were managed and analysed in two stages using MAXQDA software (VERBI Software, 2019). At the end of Phase 1, FG transcripts were reviewed for comments on study protocol clarity and/or suitability of constructs (Objective 1 – Chapter 2) and to preliminarily assess GMVS-ArabV face validity used to assess global meaning violations (Objective 4 – Chapter 5). At the end of Phase 2, FG and individual interview transcripts were combined and analyzed as one data-set using

thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to: examine the pre- and postwar content of global meaning structures (Objective 2 – Chapters 5, 6, and 7); investigate pre- and postmigration stressors and distress (Objective 3 – Chapter 4), inform GMVS-ArabV validity evidence based on content (Objective 4 – Chapter 5), explore intra- (Objective 5 – Chapter 6) and interpersonal (Objective 6 – Chapter 7) cognitive reappraisal trajectories; and examine perceived psychological adjustment (Objective 7 – Chapters 6 and 7).

Mixed-methods

The findings from thematic analyses further informed sources of potentially meaning-defying pre- and postmigration stressors and manifestations of distress (Objective 3 – Chapter 4), as well GMVS-ArabV item responses (Objective 4 – Chapter 5). Quantitative and qualitative data were merged narratively.

Empirical Studies

The next section (Chapters 2 through 7) is based on published or submitted articles that make different contributions towards achieving JiM's objectives and hypotheses. To that end, Chapter 2 offers a brief literature review of empirical studies with refugee populations that focus on different components of the meaning-making model, whereas the following chapters are empirical. Chapter 3 examines the ethics- and trauma-informed challenges of designing and implementing the Arabic-language research protocol. Chapter 4 investigates exposure to pre- and postmigration trauma and prevalence of psychological distress in the sample using a mixed-methods design. Chapter 5 assesses global meaning violations and focuses on the cross-cultural adaptation (CCA) of the Global Meaning Violations Scale (GMVS) for use with Arabic-speaking refugee. The chapter is based on two articles: the first describes the initial stages of the GMVS CCA, and the second offers an innovative approach to CCA using mixed-methods and provides preliminary validity evidence of the GMVS-ArabV. Chapter 6 uses qualitative methods to examine intrapersonal meaning-making trajectories informed by religion in a sub-sample of Muslim participants. Chapter 7 uses qualitative methodology to investigate interpersonal, community-informed postwar meaning-making trajectories and their impact on perceived psychological adjustment. All empirical articles include an Arabic language abstract to ensure that the target population as well as Arab researchers and practitioners have access to the studies' main findings.

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2

Meaning-making and psychological adjustment in the aftermath of refugee trauma: A review of empirical studies

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MEANING-MAKING AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ADJUSTMENT FOLLOWING REFUGEE TRAUMA

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Introduction

In 2016, the number of refugees worldwide peaked at 65.6 million, including internally displaced persons and asylum-seekers (UNHCR, 2017), a small percentage of whom find safety in Western countries after long journeys frequently plagued with additional violence and torture. Once in resettlement, post-migration journeys include a multitude of stressors, such as discrimination, lack of economic opportunity and concerns about conflict and safety of those left behind, which are associated with mental health outcomes (Bogic et al., 2015).

Extensive evidence has documented the negative long-term mental health effects of refugee trauma, including posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as the main psychopathology associated with the refugee experience, often co-morbid with depression and anxiety in refugees resettled in Western countries (Fazel et al., 2005). Despite the severity of trauma and ongoing distress, a growing body of literature suggests that survivors of refugee trauma often experience positive psychological adjustment and perceived growth (Chan et al., 2016).

Traumatic events that are severe enough to challenge individuals' meaning systems, including beliefs about the world and their ability to envision future goals, cause enough distress to require meaning-making efforts to reduce discrepancies (Park, 2010) and rebuild shattered assumptions, leading to perceived positive life changes (Ramos et al., 2016). Perceived posttraumatic growth (PTG) then may occur when individuals make sense of their trauma, with some studies showing it to be significantly related to psychological adjustment over time (Updegraff et al., 2008). As with other populations, demographics, type of trauma, social support, religion and coping styles have all been found to be associated with PTG in refugees (Chan et al., 2016). In refugee populations, however, additional factors such as stage of the migration trajectory and culture also influence psychological adjustment.

The Meaning-Making Model

Survivors' efforts to cope with trauma often involve cognitive restructuring, which focuses on changing one's perspective regarding the traumatic event, and may lead to perceptions of benefits (Wright et al., 2007). According to Park (2010), all individuals possess general orienting systems – global meaning –, comprising beliefs, goals and a sense of purpose, which collectively provide them with cognitive frameworks through

which they structure their lives and interpret their experiences. When faced with a potentially threatening or traumatizing event, individuals assign a meaning – situational meaning –, which is then compared to the individual's global meaning to determine its fit or discrepancy. Perceptions of discrepancy cause distress thereby initiating meaning-making efforts, requiring individuals to adjust views of the event or revise their goals and beliefs about the world to accommodate new information, and restore a sense of the world as meaningful and life as worthwhile (Park & George, 2013). Perceived growth is thereby precipitated by significant challenges to one's identity or to core assumptions that give one's life meaning, and develops as one goes through meaning-making process (Davis et al., 2007).

However, not all processes of searching for meaning or all meanings made of the trauma are adaptive or result in perceived growth. Take rumination for example – if goal-directed, it can foster agency, whereas when focused on negative emotions, it is maladaptive and may lead to sustained distress (Michael & Snyder, 2005). On the other hand, for survivors of intimate partner violence, endorsing self-blame indicated acceptance of violence as normative, and represents an example of maladaptive meaning made of the trauma (Lim et al., 2015).

Further, the literature highlights the need to examine all aspects of the meaning-making process (Park, 2010), because the processes of making sense of the trauma and the perceived growth may play independent roles in psychological adjustment (Schok et al., 2008). This thorough examination may be particularly relevant in refugee populations due to the complexity of their experiences, journeys, and the role culture and community play in all aspects of recovery.

Refugee Trauma and Meaning

Refugees suffer unimaginable losses that violate beliefs and goals and rob them of much of what formerly gave life meaning and purpose. However, current theoretical frameworks of meaning-making are influenced by Western cultural traditions, examine single-event traumas, and conceptualize meaning-making as an individual process (Henrickson, et al., 2013). Their applicability to non-Western individuals, who often belong to collectivist cultures, and who survive cumulative, community-impacting traumas, is uncertain. To understand how refugees make meaning following trauma, we conducted a literature review of empirical studies with refugee populations that reflect on

different aspects of meaning-making processes, and attempted to organize them according to the meaning-making model and its different components.

Refugees' Global Meanings

All individuals possess global meaning systems that provide them with consistency, predictability, and a lens through which to see and interpret life. Since the manifestation of mental health symptoms and the meanings made of trauma are informed by culture (Schubert & Punamaki, 2011), the study of meaning-making in refugee populations requires rigorous examination of each population's culturally-informed pre-trauma beliefs and goals and sense of purpose. To further complicate the task, refugees recover from trauma and make meaning of their experiences throughout their journeys of displacement, whether they are living in protracted situations in refugee camps or have reached a country of resettlement, and that process occurs in settings and cultural contexts different from those that previously informed their global meaning systems.

The refugee trauma literature has given some attention to aspects of refugees' belief systems, namely the role of religion and spirituality that anchor global meaning systems, or assumptions about the world, self and others (ter Heide et al., 2017). However, this work has focused on how those beliefs inform coping strategies or meanings made of trauma, rather than on pre-trauma meaning systems. By that point of the journey, goals and beliefs have inevitably been impacted, through varying degrees of acculturation, by place and setting, which are crucial in restoring refugees' sense of meaning and ability to live hopeful lives (Sampson & Gifford, 2010).

Situational Meaning of Refugee Trauma

The persecution and subsequent forced migration to which refugees are subjected is plagued with potentially discrepant events, whether individually experienced, witnessed or feared. Those may require constant appraisal to determine consistency with refugees' global meaning systems.

As with other populations, resilience, coping styles or social support play fundamental protective roles from the adverse effects of trauma in refugees (Chan et al., 2016; Weine et al., 2014). However, there are aspects specific to the refugee experience that need to be carefully considered, namely how post-migration contextual stressors impact resilience, how refugees' cultures determine their coping strategies, or how protective agents and resources within refugee communities may frequently be overwhelmed and unprepared. Of note, protective factors that speak to the normalcy and

expectation of violence in the refugee experience, such as 'psychological preparedness for trauma' in survivors of politically-motivated torture in Turkey (Başoğlu et al., 1997), have also been identified in the literature.

Search for Meaning

But what prompts meaning-making process(es) in refugees? And which point(s) in their journeys? Although very little is known about what initiates automatic and/or deliberate meaning-making in refugees, one aspect that has been addressed in the literature is the benefit of narrative processes to reorganize memories and integrate discrepant events (Morkved et al., 2014).

Additionally, studies with refugee populations indicate that searching for and finding meaning are ongoing processes of resolving discrepancies, and that strategies that were at one point adaptive, might become maladaptive under different circumstances, prompting a new search for meaning. Goodman (2004) found that the avoidant behaviors that had allowed the Lost Boys of Sudan to survive years of continuous danger and violence in Sudan, Ethiopia and then Kenya, were likely to become maladaptive long term in resettlement, while Southeast Asian unaccompanied refugee minors, who had successfully adapted to life in refugee camps, showed increased distress in resettlement due to lack of familiarity with cultural norms (Bromley, 1988).

Despite it being essentially an individual process, the literature also points towards the need to look at the role of community in meaning-making and recovery after refugee trauma. As such, social support seeking was found to be ineffective in reducing distress in resettled refugees from more than 30 countries, due to their often small, equally traumatized social networks (Huijts et al., 2014), while resettled Karen refugees required their coping processes to be framed collectively by repairing damaged community structures, cultural beliefs and values, and strengthening indigenous strategies for problem-solving (McClearly, 2016).

Meanings Made of the Refugee Experience

What, then, are the outcomes of the search for meaning? As we have seen, culture and community shape the subjective and collective meaning of trauma during refugees' trajectories, to the point where meaning-making may not even be possible in isolation (Henrickson et al., 2013). To the extent that refugees are able to regain control over their histories and journeys, and as agents with authority over their own narratives, refugees are also able to make different adaptive meanings. As an example, Burmese refugees

made meaning of their suffering and ongoing persecution prior to fleeing, through political resistance, whereas their flight process was subsequently imbued with a sense of purpose (Shakespeare-Finch et al., 2014). Further, in some of the few studies that specifically looked at the meanings made of refugee trauma, refugees from Burundi resettled in Australia, endorsed silence as a meaning made (Puvimanasinghe et al., 2014), whereas in Armenian survivors of collective trauma, the presence of meaning was endorsed through forgiveness (Toussaint et al., 2017).

Discussion

The ability to make meaning and thrive despite adversity is, as we have seen, an intricate process. In refugees, meaning-making is further complicated by added layers of complexity associated with the refugee experience. And yet, refugees are able to achieve growth and psychological adjustment, making it all the more urgent to thoroughly explore all aspects of their meaning-making process. However, very few studies have specifically investigated the construct of meaning. The processes and outcomes identified above were, by and large, from research aimed at identifying factors contributing to psychological adjustment in refugees, such as aspects of coping or resilience, but provide rich insight into the complexity of the process and pave the way to exploring different aspects of meaning-making in refugees.

There is a long road ahead in understanding the full complexity of meaning-making processes in refugee populations throughout their trajectories of flight and perceived posttraumatic growth. The literature gives us clues towards considering meaning-making a journey rather than an endpoint, which may be particularly relevant in the case of refugee populations If refugees are able to make different meanings throughout their flight journeys as the literature seems to suggest, a good starting point for researchers will be to investigate what triggers search for meaning. Above all, insight into how these survivors, individually and collectively, make sense of their trauma requires of us, as researchers, the ability to recognize in refugees their own agency and the wealth of personal and community resources that allow them to thrive and grow despite the trauma and violence.

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3

Ethics- and trauma-informed challenges of implementing JiM's research protocol

This chapter is based on the paper

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“I’M GOING TO TELL YOU SOMETHING I NEVER TOLD ANYONE”: ETHICS- AND TRAUMA-INFORMED CHALLENGES OF IMPLEMENTING A RESEARCH PROTOCOL WITH SYRIAN REFUGEES

"سأخبرك بشيء لم أخبر أحداً به مطلقاً": تحديات الأخلاق -والصدمة- المعرّفة في تنفيذ بروتوكول بحث مع اللاجئين السوريين

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Abstract

Given the potential vulnerability of refugee populations as research subjects, careful consideration should be given to the ethical and trauma-informed challenges of refugee mental health research, and to the impact conducting such research has on researchers. This study aimed to examine the challenges of implementing a mental health research protocol with Syrian refugees living in Portugal. Guided by the integrated meaning-making model, the research project "Journeys in Meaning" employed a mixed-methods cross-sectional design to explore posttraumatic cognitive processing in refugees, using two phases of data collection: two Focus Groups (Phase 1) in October and December 2018, to test the protocol, and 39 in-depth individual interviews (Phase 2) between January and May 2019, to implement said protocol. Results reflect on the strategies used to address methodological challenges related to protocol design, including engaging key stakeholders and subject-matter experts, participant recruitment, and language issues pertaining to interpretation and confidentiality, as well as strategies to address ethical- and trauma-informed challenges aimed at minimizing harm and maximizing benefit that followed social justice principles. The research protocol thus included safeguards to counter participant fragility and experienced injustices, and strategies to foster strength and resilience. Repeated empathetic exposure to traumatic content and the practical challenges of implementing the protocol eventually led the Researcher to experience compassion fatigue. Findings suggest the need for adaptive approaches to research with refugee populations that challenge strict compliance with the traditional principles of "do no harm" and researcher neutrality, and accommodate individual and community complexities.

Keywords: ethics-in-practice; vicarious trauma; vicarious growth; compassion satisfaction; Syrian refugees

الملخص

نظراً إلى الحساسية المحتملة لدى اللاجئين كمواضيع بحثية، ينبغي إعطاء اعتبار دقيق للتحديات الأخلاقية والمتعلقة بالصدمات النفسية لبحوث الصحة النفسية للاجئين، وللتأثير الذي يتركه إجراء مثل هذه الأبحاث على الباحثين. هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى الفحص في تحديات تنفيذ بروتوكول أبحاث الصحة النفسية مع اللاجئين السوريين المقيمين في البرتغال. مسترشاداً بنموذج صنع المعنى المتكامل، استخدم المشروع البحثي "رحلات في المعنى" تصميماً مقطعياً متعدد الأساليب لاستكشاف المعالجة المعرفية بعد الصدمة لدى اللاجئين، باستخدام مرحلتين من جمع البيانات: مجموعتا تركيز (المرحلة 1) في أكتوبر وديسمبر 2018 لاختبار البروتوكول، وإجراء 39 مقابلة فردية متعمقة (المرحلة 2) بين يناير ومايو 2019، لتنفيذ البروتوكول المذكور. تراجع النتائج الاستراتيجيات المستخدمة لمعالجة التحديات المنهجية المتعلقة بتصميم البروتوكول، بما في ذلك إشراك أصحاب المصلحة الرئيسيين والخبراء في الموضوع، وتوظيف المشاركين، والقضايا اللغوية المتعلقة بالتفسير والسرية، بالإضافة إلى استراتيجيات معالجة التحديات الأخلاقية والمتعلقة بالصدمة بهدف تقليل الضرر وتعظيم المنفعة التي تتبع مبادئ العدالة الاجتماعية. وبالتالي، تضمن بروتوكول البحث ضمانات لمواجهة هشاشة المشاركين و تجربتهم للظلم، واستراتيجيات لتعزيز القوة و الممانعة. أدى التعرض المتعاطف المتكرر للمحتوى الصادم والتحديات العملية لتنفيذ البروتوكول في النهاية إلى إصابة الباحث بإرهاق التعاطف. تشير النتائج إلى الحاجة إلى أساليب تكيفية للبحث مع اللاجئين والتي تتحدى الامتثال الصارم للمبادئ التقليدية المتمثلة في "عدم إلحاق الضرر" وحياد الباحثين، وتستوعب التعقيدات الفردية والمجتمعية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأخلاق في الممارسة، صدمة غير مباشرة، نمو غير مباشر، الرضا عن التعاطف، لاجئون سوريون.

Introduction

Over the last decade, at least 100 million people were forcibly displaced from their homes (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2021). A minority of these refugees found safety in Western countries of asylum following exposure to debilitating traumatic events and devastating losses (Steel et al., 2009). In post-migration settings, refugees remain vulnerable to significant daily stressors related to poverty, discrimination, language and cultural adaptation, which can be aggravated if they have unclear or non-permanent legal status, their families are at risk, or they depend on state-sponsored host programs (Matos et al., 2022). For host countries, sudden increases in refugee arrivals pose significant economic, social and public health challenges. These challenges call for data-driven policies that promote psychological well-being as a condition for successful long-term integration (Cinaroglu, 2019; Hynie, 2018).

The Syrian war has led to the forced displacement of an estimated 12 million civilians since its onset in 2011 (UNHCR, 2021). Studies have thus far documented the negative mental health effects of the war, including Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), often co-morbid with depression and anxiety (Peconga et al., 2020; Renner et al., 2021), which can impair refugees' ability to learn new skills and rebuild their lives (Sorgen, 2015). However, despite the severity of trauma, refugees also appear to experience positive psychological adjustment, and perceive growth in the aftermath of trauma (Chan et al., 2016).

The search for meaning in the aftermath of trauma is a critical step in the process of posttraumatic recovery (Brown, 2008). The trauma recovery literature posits that, event that challenge individuals' orienting systems require cognitive reappraisal efforts through meaning-making processes to rebuild shattered assumptions about the world (*e.g.*, expectations of safety, justice or self-reliance) and reduce distress (Park, 2010). When successful, meaning-making can lead to a return to pre-trauma psychological functioning, as individuals change their appraisal of the PTE to fit their global meaning, *i.e.*, their core beliefs, life goals, and sense of purpose, or to perceived positive life changes (Park, 2010). Refugee trauma can be severe enough to shatter core beliefs – necessary to initiate the process of searching for meaning –, however, to date, meaning-making literature has focused almost exclusively on single-event, personal disruptions and cognitive reappraisals in Western individuals (Cromer & Smyth, 2010). It is unclear how

cumulative, collective traumatic experiences affect refugees' meaning-making experience, its outcomes and impact on postdisplacement psychological well-being. Studies that address this gap in empirical knowledge are crucial to inform psychological growth-promoting interventions with refugees.

As research participants, refugees present intrinsic and extrinsic vulnerabilities that make them especially susceptible to harm and exploitation (Seagle et al., 2020). To protect refugees from emotional distress as they revisit details of overwhelming events (Newman et al., 2006), ethics committees often act as gatekeepers who, however well-intended, may establish unreasonable safeguards (Dehghan et al., 2019) that can further disenfranchise refugees and reinforce patterns of oppression and silence (Fox et al., 2020). Although the risks of retraumatization should not be minimized, the distress associated with participating in trauma research has been found to be largely mild, transitory, offset by the benefits of enrollment, and only reported by a minority of participants (Jaffe et al., 2015). Survivors see value in contributing to science-based knowledge that may help others, and, where narrative methods are used, participation can offer an empowering opportunity for individuals to regain control over their life stories, and promote agency and healing (De Haene et al., 2010). Ethically-accountable trauma research therefore requires a delicate balance between harm minimization and benefit maximization (Fox et al., 2020).

In research with refugee communities, strict compliance with fixed ethical principles may set unrealistic expectations and place undue burden on researchers who have to weigh issues of agency, power, language, culture, and distress throughout all phases of study design and implementation (De Haene et al., 2010; Dehghan & Wilson, 2019). When designing and implementing study protocols, refugee trauma researchers are required to integrate ethics guidelines, rigorous methodology, language and cultural competency, while also being exposed to vast quantities of traumatic material, often with inadequate supervision (Newman et al, 2006).

The effects of secondary exposure to trauma content on direct service providers, including clinicians, therapists, and humanitarian workers, have been widely documented in the vicarious trauma literature (Baird & Kracen, 2006; Newell & MacNeil, 2010), yet little is known about its impact on mental health trauma researchers. As some of the adverse consequences of their work, trauma workers can experience: secondary traumatic stress, thus displaying symptoms that mirror those of the client; vicarious trauma

secondary to shattered worldviews; as well as compassion fatigue, which entails the loss of ability to empathize with the survivor (Knight et al., 2013). However, they can also perceive psychological benefits that include vicarious posttraumatic growth through positive changes in cognitive perspectives, vicarious resilience, and compassion satisfaction (Harrison & Westwood, 2009; Hernandez-Wolfe et al., 2015).

As ethics and research committees focus their attention on the potential harm to participants, mental health trauma researchers, who repeatedly and empathically guide individuals through narratives of untold losses and suffering, and witness distress firsthand, appear to be overwhelmingly left without a support system (van der Merwe & Hunt, 2019). Additionally, at its core, academic work with trauma survivors engages two potentially conflicting and psychologically demanding tasks: on the one hand, meticulous data collection and processing that requires highly analytical and cognitively-intense skills, while on the other hand, the ability to empathetically bear witness to the survivor's experience, which requires employment of emotional skills (Branson et al., 2018; Močnik, 2019).

Rationale for the Study

In the aftermath of the 2015 surge in Mediterranean crossings, refugee arrivals to Portugal surged significantly, requiring an unprecedented effort by national and local authorities across the country to host arriving communities (Sousa et al., 2021). With Syrians comprising one of the largest arriving communities, in 2017, we designed a research project, "Journeys in Meaning" (JiM), to assess cognitive restructuring processes in war-exposed Syrian refugees. Findings from the study will inform evidence-based psychological growth-promoting policy and practice with resettled refugees.

Given the compounded vulnerabilities of refugee populations in postdisplacement settings, this case analysis aims to examine the ethical and trauma-informed challenges of implementing JiM's Arabic-language protocol, as well as the impact of project implementation on the lead researcher.

Method

Study Design

Guided by Park's (2010) integrated meaning-making model, the cross-sectional mixed-methods research project relied on qualitative methodology to elicit exploratory research on pre- and post-displacement meaning systems and meaning-making

trajectories, while standardized self-report questionnaires were used to assess exposure to PTEs, trauma-related distress, and extent of belief and goal violations. The mixed-methods design would allow data triangulation and complementary and has been deemed appropriate to capture the complexity of mental health issues in refugees (Weine, et al., 2014). JiM's principal research objectives were to: 1) examine exposure to PTEs and associated psychological distress; 2) assess violations of pre-war assumptions; 3) explore narrative accounts of traumatic experiences and subsequent processes of searching for meaning; 4) identify cognitive processes that facilitate or impede meaning-making; and 5) analyze the contribution of refugees' meaning-making strategies to psychological adjustment. With this research, we expected to identify collectively- and culturally-informed meaning-making processes that would indicate specific needs in Syrians' postdisplacement experience. We posited that: different types of PTEs would violate different meaning systems; not all attempts to find meaning would be growth-promoting; and that refugees with completed meaning-making journeys would perceive improved psychological functioning.

The proposed design comprised two phases of data collection. Phase 1, implemented between September and December 2018, would consist of four Focus Groups (FG) in Lisbon, with 5-7 participants each, organized by gender. FGs would provide an opportunity to test the protocol's face validity and reach a shared understanding of terminology, including appropriate probing questions (Upvall et al., 2009). Building on FG findings (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008), between January and April 2019, 30 additional refugees living across continental Portugal would participate in cognitive interviews to capture detailed accounts of their integrated meaning-making experiences.

JiM was hosted by ISPA – Instituto Universitário's William James Center for Research, and is the responsibility of the first author, who is a clinical psychology PhD proponent (hereinafter, the "Researcher"), and who was advised by a Research Committee (RC) and an Expert Committee (EC). The RC included the author of the meaning-making theoretical model, as well as one refugee trauma and one psychological adjustment scholar, each. JiM involved strategic partnerships with refugee community leaders, resettlement and community organizations, cultural mediators, and key stakeholders across Portugal who formed the EC, and counseled on cultural, language, outreach, and logistics during project design and implementation. JiM was funded by the

Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (SFRH/BD/129602/2017) and, prior to interacting with participants, the project received ethical approval of ISPA – Instituto Universitário's Ethics Committee (Ref. D/004/09/2018) in September 2018.

Participants and Procedures

Eligible participants were recently-arrived (≥6 months) Syrian Arabic-speaking adults (≥18yo). Recruitment included: study information sessions hosted by local community and resettlement organizations; distribution of flyers in Arabic, English and Portuguese to organizations and key stakeholders for affixation and dissemination; and social media postings. Snowball sampling was subsequently used. Study participants signed consent forms, were ensured of confidentiality and anonymity, briefed on the potential symptoms and normal reactions to the retelling of their stories, and informed of the possibility of withdrawing at any time and of referral for psychosocial support, as needed. All interviews were audio-recorded following written and oral confirmation of consent.

Materials

The protocol consisted of six documents: (1) "Information to participants" to be provided at the beginning of the GF/IDI in print and reviewed orally, with a description of the study procedures, research team, clarification of role of researcher, participant's rights, confidentiality, risks and benefits; (2) "Consent form" to be signed and dated by participants; (3) Socio-demographic questionnaire built for the purposes of the study to collect key determinants of refugee health (Hynie, 2018); (4) Harvard Trauma Questionnaire – Arabic version (*HTQ*; Shoeb et al., 2007) to assess exposure to trauma events (Part 1; 45 items), torture history (Part 5; 34 items), and trauma symptoms in the two weeks prior to the interview (Part 4); (5) Global Meaning Violations Scale (*GMVS*; Park et al., 2016) measuring disruption of beliefs (5 items) and goals (8 items) in the aftermath of a traumatic event on a 5-point Likert scale, to be cross-culturally adapted for use with Arabic-speaking refugees; and (6) Semi-structured interview guide to explore pre- and post-traumatic meaning cognitions, which established "the events that led you to leave your country" as a baseline to reflect on pre- and post-trauma beliefs, life goals, and sense of purpose. Study materials were designed in English and subsequently translated and back-translated to Arabic.

Data Processing

Participant anonymity was ensured by assigning a numerical code to each participant, which was then used to identify them across all data. Detailed notes on individual reactions and expressed immediate needs or concerns both during and after the interview were kept in a separate tracker. Audio recordings were transcribed, the original files subsequently destroyed, and identifying information removed from transcriptions. Digital files were kept in a separate server and paper files placed in a locked cabinet. Only the Researcher had full access to the restricted files and research assistants signed confidentiality agreements for processing separate datasets.

Expected Outcomes

Expected key outcomes were quantitative – pre-flight PTEs, PTSD diagnosis, extent of belief and goal violations – and qualitative – meanings-made of trauma and perceived changes to psychological functioning. Secondary outcomes included: preliminary validation of the GMVS-ArabV and integrated pathways of Syrians' meaning-making processes.

Study Implementation

Data collection effectively started in October 2018 and ended the following May. The Researcher, who was assisted by Arabic language interpreters in Phase 1 FGs, collected all data.

Phase 1: Focus Groups

Six Syrian resettled (n = 2) and relocated (n = 4) refugees, including five women and one man, signed-up for two small FGs in October and December 2018, in Lisbon, following in-person information sessions facilitated by the Researcher. One woman was a no-show, therefore final group composition was FG1, n = 2 women, and FG2, n = 2 women and n = 1 man. Participants averaged 37.4 years in age (SD = 12.2), spent a mean of 27.8 months in transit (SD = 18.8), had been living in Portugal for over two years (M = 27.8 months; SD = 7.3), and all travelled with their children. Highest level of formal education was: n = 1 basic, n = 1 middle, and n = 3 secondary school.

Phase 2: In-Depth Individual interviews

Twenty-one men (55.6%) and 19 women (44.4%) between the ages of 19 and 55 (M = 27.8; SD = 6.5) enrolled in Phase 2. One man dropped-out after becoming distressed during the study. The final sample thus consisted of 39 Syrian nationals: 31 (80%) beneficiaries of higher education programs for refugees (*i.e.*, "the other one

percent", according to the UNHCR (2016)), three spontaneous asylum-seekers, and five EU-relocated refugees. Participants averaged less than three years in Portugal (*M* = 33.2 months; *SD* = 19.6) and had exceptionally high formal education: 2 doctoral, 11 Master's, and 19 Bachelor's degrees. Seven interviews were conducted in Portuguese and the remainder in English, all with study materials in Arabic, as well as English and Portuguese, and lasted on average 90 minutes. Researcher and participants met in partner organizations' offices or in quiet places of participants' convenience, and interviews were held in the districts of Braga and Oporto in the north (40%), Aveiro and Coimbra (22%) and Lisbon (36%) in central Portugal, and in the southern district of Évora (2%).

Preliminary Results and Dissemination of Findings

Preliminary JiM findings have thus far suggested that: regardless of immigration status, war-affected civilians are exposed to numerous, extreme PTEs and to significant pre- and post-migration daily stressors capable of violating meaning systems; refugees make meaning of shattered cognitions throughout their migration journeys; and meanings-made of trauma contribute differently to psychological adjustment. Principal strategies for dissemination of findings have included presentations in scientific conferences, publications in peer-reviewed journals, social media postings with abstracts available in Arabic to allow wider audiences to monitor study progress, and dissemination to key stakeholders and to individual participants.

Results

Strategies to Address Methodological Challenges

Protocol

The integrated meaning-making model (Park, 2010) was originally developed and tested largely in US-based student populations. Its applicability to survivors of refugee trauma thus required preliminary consultations with key Syrian community members and scholars to assess if, and how, meaning-making and its derivative processes would be similarly understood in the target population (International Test Commission, 2018). Although no culture-informed disparities were found, constructs such as, "life as meaningful," "core beliefs," or "sense of purpose," were flagged as potentially complex for prospective participants to readily apprehend. As such, two strategies were devised to maximize suitability of approach and language. On the one hand, we employed a Syrian translator with active field experience with arriving communities, who counseled on terminology and best approaches based on the target population's perceived ability to

grasp concepts and disclose personal experiences. On the other hand, the RC recommended that the protocol be pilot-tested in Focus Groups before proceeding with cognitive interviews, and that time be reserved at the end for participants to provide feedback on content and language. As such, participants found the protocol appropriate and the concepts and wording familiar, albeit “difficult” to reflect upon.

Subsequent to FG findings, adjustments to language included: “worldviews/how you see the world” being employed to convey “global meaning,” similarly to “what you lived for before the war/live for now” to access “sense of purpose.” The protocol further anticipated strategies to help ground participants and guide them away from the implicit abstraction of some constructs by providing concrete examples (*e.g.,* going from un-cued questions to cued probing), and setting a baseline for potential disruptions by thinking back on participants’ “own” lives to connect them to their concrete experiences instead of offering general impressions.

Recruitment

Despite intense recruitment efforts, including mediation through resettlement agencies and community leaders to help build trust between eligible participants and the Researcher (Fox et al., 2020), Phase 1 yielded only 5 participants who self-organized to integrate two small FGs. We expected FGs to encourage participation in potentially-stigmatizing mental health research (Ekblad & Bäärnhielm, 2002). Instead, the group setting proved to be a deterrent to enrollment. Community research fatigue, concerns about confidentiality, and preoccupation with immediate socioeconomic needs were suggested as reasons why prospective participants may have been reticent to participate. Considering the confidentiality concerns expressed by participants during the test phase, a decision was made to eliminate language interpretation in Phase 2, effectively requiring fluency in English or Portuguese.

Participant enrollment in IDIs was successful to the point of drawing a waitlist beyond data saturation, and logistical and programmatic ability to accommodate additional participants. Key to successful recruitment were: the individual setting; elimination of interpreters, who would have likely been from the same community; elimination of inclusion criterion requiring refugee status, as to capture a diversity of refugee experiences, regardless of legal status or pathways to safety; and snowball recruitment by individuals who participated in the study and subsequently recruited and, in many cases helped organized, interviews with other participants in their towns.

Language

There were several challenges pertaining to language, common to field conditions but challenging for scientific accuracy, chief of which pertained to Phase 2 participants being required to access or express certain ideas or constructs in a non-native language (Schwarz et al., 2010). However, the importance of giving participants an opportunity to speak freely cannot be overstated, especially in a community with shattered social identity (Smeekes, et al., 2017). Feelings of mistrust and isolation are not uncommon in the aftermath of the collective trauma (Strang & Quinn, 2019) and were painfully articulated by several participants, one of whom pointedly asked, "do you think my [Syrian] friends would tell me the things they told you?"

Outputs of narrative methods

There were marked differences in Phase 1 and Phase 2 participants' ability to access and narrate posttraumatic cognitions. FG participants, all in Portugal on refugee status, appeared generally unavailable to engage in abstract, deep reflections about meaning in life, and often rerouted the discussion to more pressing socioeconomic needs. It is unclear how the group setting, issues of confidentiality, and level of formal education impacted individual ability to delve into meaning-making narratives. In Phase 2, participants were largely beneficiaries of the higher education programs for refugees and appeared to be cognitively better equipped to engage in meaningful reflection. Additionally, regardless of past trauma and significant daily stressors, student-refugees were generally able to set aside discussions about potential immediate concerns, access the invoked cognitions, and provide rich data.

Strategies to Address Ethical and Trauma-Informed Challenges

Harm Minimization

The protocol included safeguards to address distress resulting from and subsequent to the research encounter, which were employed as appropriate to individual needs. In addition to explaining the nature of symptoms associated with revisiting traumatic experiences and referral to psychosocial support in the community, other safeguards included: destigmatization of help-seeking, empathetic expression of sorrow, recognition of strength and resilience, and offering strategies to minimize distress (*e.g.*, breathing and grounding exercises). The latter was especially useful to regroup FG2 participants and interpreter, following a particularly difficult account, in Arabic, that led to collective crying, and to the Syrian interpreter also becoming visibly agitated and

momentarily unable to convey to the Researcher what had been narrated. In Phase 2, trauma content-related distress had various manifestations, the most common of which included participants becoming emotional subsequent to, or avoidant at the prospect of, thinking back or retelling a specific event. As such, three participants opted for writing down instead of verbalizing a difficult occurrence and then asked the Researcher to read the description (*e.g.*, one young woman wrote, “in 2013, I was blown up with my friends when I was in school. I saw many friends dead”). At least two participants reported pre-interview anxiety leading to severe insomnia prior to the interviews. Lastly, one torture survivor was despondent throughout his interview, leading the Researcher to concluding the interview early rather than probing, and to discussing options of care.

Benefit Maximization

All study participants were offered a €10 voucher. Phase 1 recruitment materials included reference to the voucher, which was used as incentive for enrollment. However, following recommendations from FG participants, who found the amount insufficient to serve as incentive, in Phase 2, reference to the voucher was removed from the materials, and when it was gifted at the end of the interview, it was overwhelmingly welcomed as a pleasant surprise.

Numerous participants expressed being thankful for the opportunity to share their stories, and, especially among student-refugees, to contribute to evidence-based knowledge that might help their community. Some participants further expressed their gratitude by offering to help recruit others, effectively becoming project champions. To some, the research encounter also presented an important opportunity for healing. One rare and powerful healing experience occurred when a young woman became emotional after reading the trauma symptoms in the HTQ. As she wiped away the tears, she stated: “until now – until just now! – I blamed [life in] Portugal for my suffering. Now I understand it’s normal.” Lastly, on follow-up, four participants expressed the relief they felt for “letting things out,” being “able to say things that [they] kept to [them]sel[ves] for a long time,” feeling “much better after talking to [the Researcher];” most tellingly, especially among a community that had been receiving so much attention from Portuguese researchers, civil society, the media, and government institutions alike, one participant sent a message stating, “we rarely find a person who asks and listens. So I enjoyed that.”

Impact of Refugee Trauma Research on the Researcher

Researchers as Agents of Social Justice

The protocol included strategies to counter participant fragility and experienced injustices, and to foster strength and dignity (De Haene et al., 2010). Although refugee health researchers are in unique positions to detect and possibly alert service providers to needs disclosed during the research encounter, striking a healthy balance between neutrality and rigor, and consequential thinking (i.e., anticipating and weighing harm and benefit; Fox et al., 2020) can be mentally taxing. Additionally, while research widely differs from service provision, the distinctions may appear unfair and incomprehensible to those ineligible to participate (Seagle et al., 2020), and overwhelming to researchers if confronted with misguided participant expectations.

Some of the harm minimization and benefit maximization strategies followed social justice principles (Ellis et al., 2007; Hugman et al., 2011), namely the empathetic expression of sorrow and outrage the Researcher, appreciation for individual, family, and community resilience, holding someone's silence when words were insufficient to describe their suffering, or simply bearing witness to someone's story. The protocol subsequently included individual follow-up to thank each participant for their participation, ask how they were doing after revisiting their personal experiences, and inquire about the issue that was most pressing to them (*e.g.*, referral to legal services for a stateless Palestinian refugee, asking about a sick parent, or connecting a participant to a local basketball team).

Fatigue and Trauma Exposure

Language barriers, scheduling logistics, difficult access to the complex cognitions that were the object of the study, repeated empathetic engagement, and exposure to trauma content were all issues that put the Researcher at risk for psychological distress (Habib, 2019). In the early stages of data collection, access to individual meaning systems was, at best, challenging, with marked improvement in study outputs with the enrollment of student-refugees. Although students reported having never given much thought to the meaning of life, they largely and more promptly welcomed the discussion, and were available to explore their complex cognitive processing.

In terms of the logistics of interviewing, there was an initial concern not to schedule more than three IDIs in a given week, to give the Researcher time to process the material and create room for appropriate, empathetic witnessing (Močnik, 2019) before

the next interview. However, as the pace of enrollment increased and eventually peaked at four back-to-back interviews per day, in addition to feeling emotionally depleted, the Researcher began feeling guilty for no longer being able to hold each individual account with the space and respect it merited. The Researcher also noted progressive decreased ability to express empathy and began feeling emotionally numb towards the end of data collection, which studies have found to be protective (Lusk & Terrazas, 2015). Having surpassed data saturation, individual accounts became increasingly similar and fatigue began to take hold. This is evidenced through shorter interjections by the Researcher, as well as missed opportunities to explore themes that had otherwise been comprehensively explored with earlier participants.

Trauma, Survival and Privilege

"I'm going to tell you something I never told anyone." Like this 21-year-old man, other participants made similar announcements before sharing frightful, humiliating or shame-filled experiences. Although the study protocol did not call for narration of specific PTEs, as such data was collected quantitatively to minimize distress (Jaffe et al., 2015), participants frequently wanted to narrate the extreme experiences that had challenged their meaning systems. On such occasions, the Researcher promptly engaged the protective cognitive strategies she had been trained to employ over 12 years of fieldwork with survivors of torture: listening empathetically while focusing on capturing information relevant to the object of the meeting, debriefing (preferentially) with a refugee trauma colleague, and, if needed, taking a "mental health" day off. And yet, being privy to participants' narratives gave the Researcher an overwhelming sense of privilege and appreciation for participants' strength and resilience, which has been shown to provide opportunities for psychological growth (Barrington & Shakespeare-Finch, 2013). This positive reappraisal of worldviews is something the Researcher had experienced earlier in her career, including reappraised sense of purpose, which continued to prove adaptive throughout study implementation.

Discussion

This study assessed the challenges of implementing an Arabic-language mental health research protocol with Syrian refugees living in a post-migration setting. The complexity of constructs and cognitive processing under study, language and cultural specifications, severe trauma exposure, and the compounded vulnerabilities associated with participants' recent arrival to Portugal called for a network of advisors that could

help bridge the gap between rigorous design and the realities of field research work. Although exacting on the Researcher, the flexibility required to accommodate methodological, ethical, and trauma-informed challenges was manageable due to a combination of prior training, help-seeking behavior, and the support provided by Research and Expert Committees alike, throughout all phases of the project.

The lessons from protocol implementation focus on the need for adaptive approaches to recruitment, practice, agency, harm-benefit balance, and researcher self-care, that render traditional ethics principles that emphasize strict application of the principles of "do no harm" or researcher neutrality at odds with the practical challenges of doing research with forced migrants. Strict compliance with those principles may unintentionally disenfranchise already marginalized population samples (Newman et al., 2007). Instead, refugee scholars have discussed the need for a new ethics paradigm that promotes flexibility, ethical and ecological thinking, and where researchers have an obligation to bring benefit to participants and to commit to principles of social change (Fox et al., 2020; De Haene et al., 2010; Seagle et al., 2020).

Although JiM participants occasionally evidenced distress as they recalled particularly difficult life events, the symptoms were not only mild and transitory, but also appropriate to content. The protocol included safeguards to offset potential helplessness or loss of control arising from, or subsequent to, the research encounter (Jaffe et al., 2015) as well as strategies to provide opportunities for healing and justice, as appropriate. These were achieved through debriefing protocols that normalized distress, promoted the empathic expression of outrage, and offered a participant-centered approach that recognized researcher-participant power differentials, and vulnerabilities and strengths as relational (De Haene et al., 2010). In our research, although follow-up protocols were often time- and emotional resource-consuming, participants reported feeling thankful, reassured of the purpose of their contribution, and, often, empowered.

Given repeated reports of research fatigue and compromised trust among the Syrian community, the chance recruitment of highly educated participants with multi-language proficiency provided meaningful opportunities for safe disclosure, reflection, and healing, despite the methodological limitation of having individuals discuss complex cognitions in a non-native language. Additionally, as the Researcher began evidencing signs of compassion fatigue, a decision was made to end data collection, since data saturation had also been surpassed and despite there still being participants awaiting

interviews. It is unclear what the decision would have been had data collection objectives not yet been reached and what strategies would have otherwise been implemented to support the Researcher's wellbeing.

Although safeguards for participants, including debriefing and follow-up were thoroughly discussed and incorporated into the protocol, strategies to protect the Researcher from harm were defined and implemented on an *ad hoc* basis. It is therefore crucial that, in addition to those for participants, protocols also integrate clearly defined safeguards for researchers, with provisions for self-care and regular supervision that, at a minimum, minimize secondary trauma, compassion fatigue, and burnout (Knight, 2013; Močnik, 2019), but can also offer opportunities for vicarious resilience, growth, and compassion satisfaction.

Refugee scholars have an opportunity to help shape the discourse and public perceptions of refugees. Because forced migrants are inherently political subjects who invoke strong public opinions, centering their experiences on past trauma and vulnerability can contribute to their further stigmatization (Habib, 2019; Hynie, 2018). It is therefore important to include members of the target community throughout the research process in order to achieve a balanced representation of findings that honors the complexity and depth of individual and community experiences.

Conclusion

Finding the right balance between scientific rigor and the multitude of challenges of designing and implementing mental health research with refugees requires numerous compromises to accommodate individual and community complexities. Key to methodological soundness of JiM's findings has been maintaining a detailed log of discussions with Expert and Research Committee members of emerging needs for contextual adaptations, reasoning for any subsequent adjustments to the protocol, and the literature that supports it. Refugee mental health research that empowers study participants and acknowledges real-world conditions can lead to actionable and effective outcomes that inform host countries' policies and practice and favorably impact the wellbeing of arriving communities.

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4

Exposure to psychologically-threatening events and distress

This chapter is based on the paper

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"THAT IS NOT MY COUNTRY ANYMORE": PRE- AND POSTDISPLACEMENT TRAUMA, STRESSORS, AND DISTRESS IN WAR-AFFECTED SYRIAN CIVILIANS

"لم يعد هذا بلدي": الصدمة، الضغوطات، والاضطراب في قبل وبعد النزوح عند المدنيين السوريين المتأثرين بالحرب

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Abstract

Objective: This mixed-methods study assessed the prevalence of pre- and post-migration trauma and stressors as determinants of refugee mental health in resettlement. Method: Forty-four war-affected Syrian civilians arriving in Portugal through four streams – UNHCR resettlement, EU relocation, spontaneous asylum, and higher education programs for refugees – participated in focus groups and individual interviews. Participants completed self-report measures of trauma and torture and PTSD symptoms, and narrated pre- and post-migration experiences and distress through semi-structured interviews. We used descriptive statistics to characterize incidence of trauma and distress, and thematic analysis to identify themes of pre- and post-flight stressors. Results: Participants reported a mean 12.9 (*SD*=7.2) war trauma events, with six men also disclosing having been tortured. Twenty-five percent met diagnostic criteria for PTSD. Key results identified pre-flight contextual, personal, family and community daily stressors capable of shattering pre-war meaning systems, and post-flight common stressors aggravated by state-sponsored host conditions, the ongoing conflict, and, for the student group, subsequent to temporary returns to Syria. Conclusion: Regardless of legal status on arrival, civilians from war-torn countries may be exposed to pre- and post-migration trauma and stressors that severely impact their mental health, reinforce feelings of uprootedness, and dim integration prospects. Findings highlight the need for host countries to create opportunities for agency and autonomy to improve refugees' own integration prospects and ability to initiate their path to recovery.

Keywords: refugee trauma, social determinants of health, higher education for refugees, collective trauma, meaning-making

Clinical Impact Statement

The present study suggests the need to comprehensively address the ability of pre- and post-migration trauma and daily stressors to shatter previously-held assumptions about the world and cause significant distress in war-exposed civilians. Trauma-informed services should be tailored to the needs of different subgroups and address learned uncertainties as refugees rethink their future. Regardless of immigration status, nationals of refugee-source countries may require some degree of individual- and community-level healing as a condition for successful long-term integration.

الملخص

الهدف: قيّمت هذه الدراسة ذات المنهجيّة المختلطة انتشار صدمات وضغوطات ما قبل وبعد الهجرة كمحددات للصحة النفسية للاجئين في بلاد إعادة التوطين. المنهجيّة: شارك أربعة وأربعون مدنياً سورياً متضررين من الحرب والذين وصلوا إلى البرتغال من خلال أربع مسارات - إعادة التوطين عبر المفوضيّة العليا للاجئين، إعادة التوطين عبر الإتحاد الأوروبي، اللجوء التلقائي، وبرامج التعليم العالي للاجئين - في مجموعات التّركيز ومقابلات فرديّة. أكمل المشاركون مقياس التقرير الذاتي للصدمات والتعذيب واضطراب ما بعد الصدمة، وسردوا تجارب وضغوطات ما قبل وبعد الهجرة من خلال مقابلات شبه منظّمة. استخدمنا الاحصائيات الوصفيّة لوصف حالات الصدمة والضغط، والتحليل المواضيعي لتحديد مواضيع ضغوطات ما قبل وبعد الرحلة. النتائج: أبلغ المشاركون ما متوسطه ١٢.٩ (SD = ٧.٢) أحداث صدمة الحرب، وكشف ستّة رجال أيضاً عن تعرضهم للتعذيب. لاقى ٢٢٪ من المشاركين معايير تشخيص اضطراب ما بعد الصدمة. حددت النتائج الأساسية الضغوطات اليوميّة السياقيّة والشخصيّة والعائليّة والمجتمعيّة قبل الرحلة على أنها قادرة على تحطيم أنظمة المعنى قبل الحرب، والضغوطات الشائعة بعد الرحلة التي تفاقمت بسبب ظروف البلد المضيف التي ترعاها الدولة، وأيضاً بسبب الصراع المستمر، وبالنسبة لفئة الطلاب، العودة المؤقتة إلى سوريا. الخلاصة: بغض النظر عن الوضع القانوني عند الوصول، قد يتعرض المدنيون من البلدان المتضررة من الحرب لصدمات وضغوطات ما قبل وبعد الهجرة، والتي بدورها تؤثر بشدّة على صحتهم النفسيّة، وتعزز مشاعر الاقتلاع، وتخفف آفاق الاندماج. تسلّط النتائج الضوء على حاجة البلدان المضيفة إلى خلق فرص للوكالة والاستقلالية لتحسين آفاق اندماج للاجئين وقدرتهم على بدء طريقهم نحو التعافي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: صدمة للاجئين؛ المحددات الاجتماعية للصحة؛ التعليم العالي للاجئين؛ الصدمات الجماعية؛ صنع المعنى.

Introduction

The integration of refugees[2] in post-displacement settings has been the focus of intense debate as host societies attempt to promote stable and safe solutions to the increasing numbers of those forcibly displaced worldwide (Hynie, 2018; Lichtenstein & Puma, 2019; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2019). Among immigrant populations, refugees face particular challenges and have needs and vulnerabilities related not only to the forced nature and uprootedness of their experience, but also to the exacting conditions they find in host countries. If left unaddressed, these can severely impact their mental health (Kim & Kim, 2014; Steel et al., 2009) and ability to successfully integrate into their new communities (Heeren et al., 2014; Schick et al., 2016).

The refugee experience is characterized by exposure to multiple Potentially-Traumatic Events (PTEs) in the Country of Origin (COO), flight journeys plagued with additional trauma, uncertainty and loss, and significant stressors in post-migration settings (Porter & Haslam, 2005). Extensive evidence has documented the negative long-term mental health effects of refugee trauma on survivors, with refugees presenting significantly higher rates of psychopathology than host and other immigrant populations, including Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) often with co-morbid depression and anxiety (Bogic et al., 2015). Yet psychopathology is not an inevitable outcome of refugee trauma. Contemporary models of refugee health have evolved to encompass three fundamental tenets. First, the effect of trauma is not exclusively determined by exposure to pre-migration trauma but rather is moderated by the socio-political conditions in the country of resettlement (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010). Second, psychological distress is not necessarily pathological, but may be a normative response to the extreme events and circumstances refugees encounter (Silove et al., 2017). Third, despite the severity of trauma and compounding daily stressors, refugees are extremely resilient, and can achieve positive psychological adjustment and perceive posttraumatic growth as they make meaning of their past experiences and integrate them into their life stories (Chan et al., 2016).

Over the last decade, there has been increased recognition of the roles that the complex web of social and political factors play in determining health outcomes across

[2] We use the term “refugees” and “refugee populations” interchangeably to signify survivors of the refugee experience, regardless of legal status or pathways to safety. Where technically pertinent, we will make a distinction between resettled refugees, asylum-seekers and/or the type of host program. Similarly, the stand-alone word “resettlement” is generally used to indicate a post-displacement setting, unless otherwise specified to indicate a refugee resettlement program.

different settings and populations (Braveman et al., 2011). Determinants of health are often informed by arriving communities' presumed deservingness and limited by ambiguous and often contentious relationships with the state and service providers (Castañeda et al., 2015). Discrimination, inadequate housing, under- or unemployment and associated financial struggles, and acculturative stress are all common stressors faced by immigrants, which, in refugees, may be compounded by concerns related to the status of conflict and the well-being of those left behind, the asylum process, survivor's guilt, and the concurrent fear of being forcibly returned and being unable to go home should an emergency arise (Heeren et al., 2014; Hynie, 2018; Nakeyar & Frewen, 2016). These stressors may not only heighten the effects of previous trauma but also impair refugees' ability to recover and achieve psychological adjustment (Schweitzer et al., 2006). Poor mental health impacts refugees' ability to hold jobs, access needed services, and learn a new language and way of life, and thus represents a significant public health concern with considerable societal and financial costs (Sengoelge et al., 2019). Yet refugee integration policies are often overwhelmingly guided by their primary, short-term goal of financial self-sufficiency. They tend to lack medium to long-term planning and resource allocation (Ghumman et al., 2016) and fail to prioritize psychological well-being as a key driver of successful integration (Rotenberg et al., 2000).

As a consequence of a protracted and brutal civil war, Syria has, for the past few years, consistently been the main refugee source-country in the world (UNHCR, 2019). Since 2011, approximately 6 million civilians have been repeatedly displaced within Syria and an additional 6.7 million sought refuge across the border, mostly remaining in neighboring countries in protracted situations. Some 1 million subsequently made perilous journeys to Europe, which registered peak Mediterranean crossings in 2015 (European Commission, 2016).

Portugal, a country with a population of 10 million at the western edge of Europe, has traditionally hosted symbolic numbers of refugees both through its UNHCR resettlement program, which between 2007 and 2014 resettled a total of 180 persons, and through its spontaneous asylum program, which, in 2015, with a record-high 1.2 million applications across EU member states, received but 830 new applications (EU, 2016; Serviço de Estrangeiros e Fronteiras, 2016). Despite not being a preferred refugee destination country, faced with the escalation of the Syrian war and the successive humanitarian crises in the Mediterranean, Portugal resolved to offer two additional

avenues for international protection: the 2014 Global Platform for Syrian Students (GP4SYS), an emergency scholarship program that flew Syrian college-age students to Lisbon, granted them student visas, and placed them in universities across the country, and that by 2018 was actively hosting 158 students (GP4SYS, 2019); and the European Commission's 2015 emergency relocation scheme, through which 2,144 mostly Syrian, Iraqi and Eritrean asylum-seekers entered Portugal following relocation from Italy and Greece (Asylum Information Database, 2019).

Despite broad consensus around conceptualizing integration as a two-way process, the onus of the success of integration policies rests almost exclusively on arriving refugees' ability to become a part of, and participate in, the new society (Hynie, 2018; Oduntan & Ruthven, 2019). Still, psychological distress caused by war, persecution, difficult migration journeys, resettlement, and generalized uncertainty keep refugees in survival mode for years, recurrently weighing their options, and unable to envision their own future (Ben Farhat et al., 2018).

Considering that the lack of knowledge about refugees' mental health needs and the perceived stressors they face may lead to inadequate care and interventions, and hinder their ability to successfully integrate, we aim to analyze the determinants of mental health in a sample of war-affected Syrian civilians living in Portugal. In order to understand the complexity of the Syrian experience, we conducted a cross-sectional, mixed-methods study to capture the breadth of pre- and post-migration stressors and symptoms of distress in different subgroups of war-affected Syrian civilians across immigration statuses.

Method

Participants and Procedures

This study utilizes data from a larger research project that examines how refugees make meaning of their past experiences and achieve psychological adjustment in post-displacement settings. We recruited Syrian nationals across continental Portugal in close consultation with resettlement agencies and community-based organizations, and used a combination of convenience and snowball sampling. Outreach included interpreter-facilitated information sessions in resettlement agencies and dissemination of Arabic language flyers on social networks. Inclusion criteria comprised: (a) national of a refugee-source country (b) in Portugal for minimum 6 months, (c) adult (age 18+), and (d) Arabic

speaker with English or Portuguese fluency. One prospective participant was excluded after becoming overwhelmed by the prospect of retelling her story.

A total of 45 Syrians participated in the study. In Phase 1, four women and 1 man took part in two small self-organized Focus Groups (FG) with 2 and 3 people each, meant to test the study protocol's face validity. Focus Groups were held in partner organizations' offices in Lisbon in October and December 2018, lasted approximately 90 minutes each, and were led with the assistance of language interpreters, who received training on role, expectations, and content of interviews. At the end of the FGs, participants were asked to provide feedback on suitability of language and content of the protocol. The protocol was considered appropriate, but participants did suggest that, eliminating the group setting and the presence of an interpreter would likely yield more prospective participants, due to hypervigilance among the recently-arrived community. Phase 2 was comprised of 40 In-Depth Individual (IDI) interviews to explore accounts of pre- and post-migration trauma, stressors and symptoms of psychological distress. IDIs were conducted without language interpretation, in either English or Portuguese, according to participant preference, and lasted 90 minutes on average. Researcher and participants met in partner organizations' offices or in quiet places of participants' convenience in 6 of 18 Portuguese districts, between February and May 2019. One Kurdish participant dropped out after becoming distressed during the interview.

The final sample therefore consisted of 44 participants: 21 men (47.7%) and 23 women (52.3%) between the ages of 19 and 59 years old (M = 28.2; SD = 6.7). Participants entered Portugal through four streams: 31 (14 Men (M), 17 Women (W); 70.3%) traveled on student visas through higher education programs for refugees, such as the GP4SYS ("*student visa participants*"), and 13 others applied for or benefitted from international protection ("*refugee protection participants*"), including UNHCR resettlement (2W; 4.5%), EU relocation (5M, 3W; 18.2%), and spontaneous asylum applications (2M, 1W; 6.8%). Participants were large-majority single (n = 37, 84.1%); 12 (27.3%) were married or partnered and one was widowed during the war. Seventy-seven percent (n = 34) had some form of higher education, including doctoral (n = 2, 4.5%), master's (n = 11, 25.0%) and bachelor's (n = 18, 40.9%) degrees, and associate or unfinished (i.e., interrupted due to the war) bachelor's degrees (n = 3, 6.8%); 8 (18%) had completed 12th grade education and 2 women had basic and middle schooling each. Median length of time since leaving Syria was 43.2 months (SD = 27.9) and stay in

Portugal ranged from 11 to 67 months (*M* = 32.2; *SD* = 19.6). Forty-one participants (93.2%) reported being currently employed (*n* = 10) or having full-time occupation (*n* = 31), i.e., being a scholarship recipient.

All participants provided written informed consent and were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Due to the potential for retraumatization, participants were instructed on the nature of symptoms and normal reactions to the retelling of their stories (Makhoul et al., 2018) and informed of the possibility of being referred for pro-bono psychosocial support. The study was approved by ISPA – Instituto Universitário's Ethics Committee (Ref. D/004/09/2018).

Measures

The study protocol included: (1) a socio-demographic questionnaire in Arabic constructed for the purposes of this study and designed to collect social determinants of refugee health, including gender, formal education, employment and legal status, as well as sections on flight journey and life in resettlement. (2) The 2007 Arabic version of the Harvard Trauma Questionnaire (HTQ; Shoeb et al., 2007), which was developed specifically for use with refugee populations to examine exposure to different types of trauma and associated distress. Parts 1 – Trauma Events (45 items) and 5 – Torture History (34 items) assessed exposure to pre-resettlement PTEs, and Part 4 – Trauma Symptoms assessed presence of PTSD symptoms in the two weeks prior to the interview. Individuals with a DSM-IV score (Items 1-16) above the recommended cut-off of 2.5 were considered symptomatic for PTSD. Lastly, (3) pre- and post-flight daily stressors and associated distress were examined through a semi-structured interview. We started by asking two open-ended questions – (Q1) "What do you feel was the main reason that led you to leave your country?" and (Q2) "When you think back on your life before the war and now, can you describe how it changed?" –, which were subsequently guided to assess participants' experiences prior to and during the war, the flight journey, and in resettlement.

Data analysis

We used descriptive statistics to characterize the sample, frequency analyses to examine exposure to PTEs, and Pearson's correlations to determine dose-effect responses between number of PTEs and severity of PTSD. We imputed missing values below 10% of the sample and $p < .05$ was considered statistically significant (Marôco, 2014). All

statistical tests were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics Software version 25 (IBM SPSS, Chicago).

FG and IDI interview audio recordings were transcribed, participants' names were replaced and coded, and transcriptions were analyzed as one dataset. We used an inductive approach to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to explore accounts of pre- and post-resettlement stressors, informed by literature on determinants of refugee mental health in resettlement (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010; Silove et al., 2017). The Lead Researcher did a first in-depth reading of all interview transcripts and created the initial coding, which was discussed with the research committee. Two research assistants subsequently coded the interviews using the thematic maps. Coding disagreements and adjustments to themes were done in consultation with the Lead Researcher and final approval by the research committee.

Results

Pre-Migration Trauma and Mental Health Outcomes

Participants reported exposure to an average of 12.9 different types of trauma (*SD*=7.2; i.e., answered "yes" to items in HTQ Part 1) ranging from 3 to 32 events. Six men (3 student visa and 3 refugee protection participants) also reported having been tortured (i.e., "while in captivity you received deliberate and systematic infliction of physical and/or mental suffering"), and endorsed an additional 76 torture events in HTQ Part 5. Table 2 indicates the prevalence of trauma and torture by Gender and Legal Status on arrival. Table 3 indicates the most common types of trauma and torture events to illustrate the extreme nature of PTEs that civilians in our sample endured.

Table 2. *Exposure to Trauma and Torture*

Variables	*n*	Trauma Events	*M*	*SD*	*n*	Torture Events	*M*	*SD*	*n*	Total Trauma & Torture	*M*	*SD*
Gender												
Men	21	329	15.7	7.8	6	76	12.7	7.7	21	405	19.3	13.6
Women	23	237	10.3	5.5	0	0	0.0	0.0	23	237	10.3	5.5
Legal Status												
UNHCR resettlement	2	36	18.0	1.0	0	0	0.0	0.0	2	36	18.0	1.0
EU relocation	8	154	19.3	8.0	2	39	19.5	8.5	8	193	24.1	16.5
Spontaneous asylum	3	45	15.0	4.9	1	11	11.0	0.0	3	56	18.7	9.7
Student Visa	31	331	10.7	6.1	3	26	8.7	4.6	31	357	11.5	7.9
Total	44	566	*12.9*	*7.2*	6	76	*12.7*	*7.7*	44	642	*14.6*	*11.2*

Twenty-five percent of participants (n = 11) showed clinically-significant PTSD: 6 women (M = 3.0; SD = .4) and 5 men (M = 2.9; SD = .2); 7 of the 13 refugee protection participants (M = 3.1; SD = .3); 4 of the 31 students (M = 2.7; SD = .2); and 3 of the 6 survivors of torture (SOTs) (none of them students; M=2.8; SD = .2). We found significant positive correlation between exposure to trauma and PTSD severity (r = .559; $p < .001$).

Table 3. *Most Common Types of Trauma and Torture*

Type of Event	***n***	**%**
Trauma (HTQ1)		
Witnessed shelling, burning, or razing of residential areas or fields	36	81.8
Confined to home because of chaos and violence outside	36	81.8
Murder or violent death of friend	31	70.5
Exposed to combat situation (explosions, artillery fire, shelling) or landmine	28	63.6
Serious physical injury of family member or friend from combat situation	28	63.6
Witnessed someone being physically harmed (beating, knifing, etc.)	24	54.5
Torture (HTQ5)		
Humiliated and threatened	6	100.0
Forced to stand for long periods of time	6	92.0
Chained or tied	4	66.7
Blindfolded	4	66.7
Punched, slapped, kicked, or struck with objects	4	66.7
Sexual torture		
Witnessed sexual abuse, rape (i.e., forced sexual activity), or torture of someone	5	83.3
Forced to undress in front of people	2	33.3
Forcibly arranged in various humiliating or sexually-explicit positions	2	33.3

Pre- and Post-Migration Daily Stressors

We asked participants to indicate the main reason to leave Syria to set a baseline to reflect on their lives prior to the war and at present time. Although we did not ask targeted questions about living conditions and sources of distress in Syria and Portugal, participants shared insights on the daily challenges of both living in a country at war and living abroad with an ongoing war at home. Through participants' accounts, we identified three themes of pre-flight stressors: contextual, personal- and family-related, and community-related. We also identified four themes of post-flight daily stressors: common post-migration stressors and stressors related to war and refugee experience, to resettlement conditions, and to temporary return to Syria.

Pre-Flight War-Related Daily Stressors

Participants related accounts of social and material wartime conditions that significantly impacted their daily lives in Syria and often challenged their worldviews to the point of still causing ongoing distress. Stressors related to: (1) context, (2) personal

and family matters, and (3) the community are summarized below and reported in detail in Table 4.

"Restricted access to basic resources and services" and a "generalized fear and insecurity" were main contextual stressors and the source of constant worry and suffering. "Even if we didn't face something very strong [in terms of war], life wasn't easy" [23W(St/2018)]. Because our sample was fairly young, participants' accounts were often tied to the daily challenges of studying, and accounts of the war "surrounding us from everywhere" [30W(St/201X)] lead to heightened anxiety, with one young woman reportedly keeping her "certificates in envelopes in case I have to flee" [32W(St/2018)]. Young men also recounted fears of being forcibly conscripted into the army as informing their decision to flee and/or accept a scholarship abroad. Participants further spoke of areas of their personal and family lives that were significant causes of distress, namely losing pre-war socio-economic status, having added responsibilities within the family, and feeling pressured to succeed. Finding the means and opportunity to leave Syria and fight for a better future was frequently on survivors' minds. As one young woman put it, "I was very worried about my future - What should I do? Will I have a job? - It was very hard to continue life [in Syria]. So, I started to think about how I could leave" [26W(St/2018)]. Community-related stressors that challenged Syrians' identity as a unified community were particularly distressing. Participants shared reports of losing trust in society and of the role of the war in unmasking underlying tensions that either created or revealed a fragmented society. The way one participant [25W(St/2018)] articulated her perception of a changed community was particularly powerful:

> "Actually, the main reason [for leaving] was that I felt everyone around me was changing because of the war. (…) And I felt that there was lying everywhere. (…) I can say that the war really affects a lot of people. Of course it has destroyed a lot of buildings but it also destroyed a million souls."

The war eventually taught hard lessons as it challenged feelings of safety and trust, with which participants still struggle as they try to adjust to life in Portugal: "the war teaches you that you shouldn't plan that far ahead. Just adapt and live for the moment." [19M(St/201X)].

Table 4

Pre-flight War-Related Daily Stressors

Theme	Subtheme	Code	Example
1. Contextual stressors	Restricted access to basic needs and services	Lack of access to basic resources and services	"People from others cities were coming to [my city] to study at the university, and they were risking their lives because they want to succeed. So it was a daily struggle. (…) We had lack of food, electricity, water, internet… For a student, it's a nightmare because you have to find electricity, whether in a café or a library, or stay out of the house until very late hours." [27M(St/2014)]
	Generalized fear and insecurity	Perception of imminent danger	"You feel like you will get killed at any time". [24W(St/2018)]
		Forced displacement	"When the war arrived in [my city], I fled with a lot of people. (…) We stayed far from the city because there were a lot of combats between the different groups". [22M(Rel/2016)]
		Forced conscription	"I didn't want to leave my country. I wanted to finish my studies and be a teacher there. But my family kept telling me, 'after you finish, you'll have to go into the army! So either you hide at home or you'll go to the army. You won't be able to be a teacher'". [25M(Rel/2017)]
		Lack of freedom & generalized suspicion	"You can't do anything. If you try to say anything against our government, they will kill us. They listen to our phones, in cafés - they are listening - maybe in the streets, in public transportation, in Universities, in every place". [32M(St/2018)]
2. Personal and Family stressors	Loss of (pre-war) socioeconomic status	Loss of property & Financial struggle	"My father worked very hard to build a house when he was already in his fifties. And then we lost everything: another war and the house is gone!" [32M(St/2014)]
	New responsibilities within the family	Reverse family roles	"When my father left Syria, I became the one responsible (…). When the [bombing] happened near our house, I had to be the one to make the call of [whether] to go [to the shelter] or stay. It was my responsibility". [30W(St/2014)]
	Pressure to succeed	Forced to grow-up faster	"Before the war we were always talking about teenage things, like going out, love, dates, guys... But after the war, we became adults. I always say that we grew up before our time". [23W(St/201X)]
		Pressure to fight for a better future	"We had to study more, work more. Because if you don't have good grades when you finish school and if you want to travel, no country or university will accept you. So, I had to work more and more, and earn more just to get away from what was going on around me". [23W(St/2018)]
3. Community stressors	Loss of trust in institutions	Loss of trust in political and religious leaders	"This was hard for me because we were always a country where people love each other. (...) It took me a long time to realize the bad things that the regime was doing". [27M(St/2016)]
	Perception of fragmented community	Changed community & Underlying tensions	"Well, there is of course sectarianism. It's there. I mean, it was hidden somehow. People are not very straight-forward when it comes to this because they want to appear open-minded, but inside they don't really accept the other". [27M(St/2014)]

NB1: Participant Coding = Age | Gender (Legal status: St=Student; As=Asylum-seeker; Rel=Relocated; Res=Resettled/Year of arrival).
NB2: Due to the small size of the community in Portugal, year of arrival may be withheld to protect the identity of participants.

Post-Flight Daily Stressors

Life in Portugal included experiences commonly narrated by immigrants – (1) "common post-migration stressors" –, such as social exclusion, pressure to succeed, and low socioeconomic status, that were further aggravated by the forced nature of participants' experiences, including the (2) "war and refugee experience", (3) "resettlement conditions", and (4) "temporary return to Syria". Post-flight daily stressors are described below and expounded in Table 5.

We identified four subthemes of "war and refugee experience" stressors: (a) forced displacement; (b) ongoing war and violence in COO; (c) perception of family and community suffering; and (d) community identity damaged by war. Despite finding safety in Portugal, forced separation from loved ones led to sadness and longing (*e.g.*, "And I really dream, 'what if I had been born here and didn't have to separate from anyone I love?" [25W(St/2018)]), as well as anxiety and frustration at the protracted nature of the conflict and its ripple effects in the Syrian community. Several students shared being keenly aware of the weight they carry for their families and community (*e.g.*, "I'm here because the war happened in my country. And this is a responsibility I don't take lightly." [23M(St/2016)]), which to some proved overwhelming: "I have too many responsibilities: my thesis, my Portuguese, finding a job… I have anxiety and I feel full of stuff." [23W(St/201X)]. Other participants expressed disbelief and anger at being forced to flee and adjust their life goals: "My dream was for my young son to go to school, learn, and maybe become a doctor. But in my country. In my house. Not like this." [29W(Res/201X)].

Unlike regular migrants, survivors of the refugee experience are seldom able to make a decision about their country of destination, and once they arrive they are subject to the conditions offered by the host country. Resettlement, relocation, asylum, and scholarship programs all have rules and conditions that can be perceived as senseless and sometimes ruthless, and constitute sources of significant distress. We identified three subthemes of "resettlement conditions" stressors: (a) concerns about host conditions, with housing being a prevailing source of distress among refugee protection participants (*e.g.*, "Right now, all I can think about is the house. [Case Manager] says they are going to kick us out. Like a threat. Well then, where should I go?" [33W(Rel/2017)]); (b) tense relationships with service providers stemming from disagreements with host agencies and others over unmet expectations; and (c) feeling at the whim of service providers. All of

these leading to feelings of powerlessness, anxiety and frustration over lack of control of their lives and future. As one relocated asylum-seeker put it: “They take you on for a year and a half and they say, ‘that’s it, your future is your own’. And you personally don’t know anything about the future.” [34W(Rel/2016)], while several students shared accounts of their lives being tightly controlled by the program director: “any decision should be approved by the director of my scholarship. But I’m also thinking about my family in Syria, thinking about the future… I’m in a race against time to do as much as possible.” [32M(St/2018)]. Lastly, the fact that a majority of participants entered Portugal on student visas meant that they were allowed to travel back to Syria – as many did – to visit family, especially during the summer months. Aside from one participant who reported feeling “more connected to [her] land” [28W(St/2015)] and a greater sense of belonging, all those who shared experiences of temporary return recounted them as a major source of distress. After living free and safe in a Portugal, participants appeared to be ill-equipped to deal with once-common challenges of being in a country at war. Subthemes of major stressors included being subjected to (a) war time PTEs and daily stressors, with one participant reporting being imprisoned upon return; (b) perceiving their society as changed, and (c) a shattered sense of belonging, as students felt out of place and unable to fit back in. These visits appeared to be especially disruptive, with participants reporting deep regret for having gone back. After being stopped at a checkpoint, which triggered severe anxiety for the rest of his stay in Syria, one young man [24M(St/201X)] declared: “I left [Syria] deciding: ‘Goodbye, forever’. I mean, that is not my country anymore”.

Table 5

Post-Flight Daily Stressors

Theme	Subtheme	Code	Example
1. Common post-migration stressors	Struggling to adjust to life in the host country	Lack of self-sufficiency and financial stability	"We are just fighting. Fighting to pay the bills, (…) [pay the] rent, to survive. It's tough". [36M(As/2016)]
	Tense relationships with host community	Discrimination/suspicion towards self	"Taking the hijab off balanced things inside me. Otherwise I would never be able to stay in Portugal. I mean... the hijab was the thing that made people scared. They were scared [of me] and I was scared of them". [31W(St/201X)]
	Family stressors in resettlement and COO	Overwhelming responsibilities and pressure to succeed	"I'm here because war happened in my country, and this is a responsibility that I don't take lightly. I cannot remove this from who I am. (…) I have to give something back to the people that I took something on, based on their suffering". [23M(St/2016)]
		Reverse family roles	"I'm responsible not only for my sister, but for my whole family, because I speak Portuguese and English. When we first arrived, I had to do everything. I still do". [21W(Rel/2016)]
2. War and refugee experience stressors	Being forcibly displaced	Forced separation from loved ones	"I couldn't imagine – I couldn't imagine – that one day I would be forced to stay outside of my country. I would be forced to be refugee in another country. To be far away from my family". [36M(St/2014)]
	Ongoing war and violence in COO	War events and related stressors in COO	"The first two years I would spend my whole day on Facebook just watching what's going on social media and people posting photos of destruction". [27M(St/2014)]
	Perception of family and community suffering in COO, transit and resettlement	Family suffering	"I see my family struggle [here] without enough money every day (...) going the rest of the week or month without enough food, without many things". [21M(As/2013)]
		Community suffering	"I know that [recently arrived refugees] went through bad situations - war, journey, hunger, things like that. They made it here to be safe and have a better life. But sometimes they can't get everything they want and we argue a lot. They don't accept what we [who've been here longer] say. It's exhausting". [25M(Rel/2017)]
	Community identity damaged by war	Forced collective amnesia	"Syrians want to just erase everything that reminds them of war and rebuild everything the way it was. It doesn't help because it doesn't acknowledge what happened, it doesn't acknowledge the suffering, it doesn't acknowledge the people who died. And for the coming generations, when they see no evidence of war, they will make the same mistakes". [27M(St/2014)]
		Perception of deep-rooted divisions in the community	"We had summer school this year [in Portugal] and the theme was "rebuilding Syria". People were arguing and fighting all the time. There was all this tension because of the war. (...) We really need to have faith again. We need to trust again". [23W(St/201X)]

		Identity lost to forced displacement	"[My children] know they are Syrian, but when they came here, they felt safe and were able to go to school... It's not like how it was in Syria. And now they say they are Portuguese". [29W(Res/201X)] "It hurts me to hear Syrian people say that they are not going to go back. Okay, I know your country is not that good, and maybe you don't want to go back, but don't say it. Because when other people hear it they will say: what kind of country is it that that their people want to leave it"? [28W(St/2015)]
3. Resettlement conditions stressors	Concerns about hosting conditions	Inadequate living conditions	"[Focus Group] [33W(Rel/2017)]: What we want is to be in a safe country, and we want stability. I could say, I want to go back to Syria. I want to go back to Turkey. I will not be able to be stable here. [34W(Rel/2016)]: [Here] we found security, there is no war. But we did not find stability. (...) [32M(Rel/2017)]: The conditions are bad, in terms of the rent for the house, everything. Water, electricity, gas bills...everything is expensive and the salaries are low. (...) If we stay in the same conditions we are in now, we will be forced to return to our country or to any other country closer to our homeland".
	Tense relationships with service providers	Managing expectations	"When I first came to Portugal and [the director of the program] told me 'if you don't work, you can't survive'. And I told her 'I don't want to work'. She said 'how will you survive if you don't work'"? [59W(Res/201X)]
	Powerlessness and lack of control over one's life	Feeling at the whim of service provider	"I asked "Why?" many times and I don't see any sense in these reasons [the director of the program] is giving. So, these past few days, I was… I am not okay. She says changing the major is not acceptable. That such is life and I have to accept it". [19M(St/201X)]
4. Temporary return to Syria	War time PTEs and daily stressors	Feeling like life was in danger	"After living here free and safe, and having the ability to say whatever I want, I went there, I was stopped at a military checkpoint, and I was *this* close to being gone". [24M(St/201X)]
	Perception of changed society	"This is a post-war city"	"Everyone is on the edge, ready to explode immediately. To me everything sounded too extreme. (...) You can sense this is a post-war city". [30W(St/201X)] "The effects of the war are still in the city and you can see the effects.(...) When you walk in the streets you can't find happy faces. All of them have a lot of problems, a lot of bad stuff happened, you feel heavy". [23W(St/201X)]
	Disrutped sense of belonging	No longer fitting in	"I always thought that when I go back I'll be able to fit in more. And I went there, and I didn't. And now I don't fit in anywhere, so I don't know what to do". [30W(St/201X)]
		Feeling misunderstood	"[After being stopped at a checkpoint] nobody could understand [how I was feeling]. [They] would laugh and say 'Oh, it's fine'. But it wasn't fine. The next day I went to the hospital. My stomach was eating itself from anxiety". [24M(St/201X)]
		Regret for having returned	"[When I was arrested] I kept thinking: why did I travel from Portugal to Syria? I deeply regretted going back to Syria. I promised myself: if I get out of prison alive, I will never go back to Syria". [22M(St/201X)]

NB1: Participant Coding = Age | Gender (Legal status: St=Student; As=Asylum-seeker; Rel=Relocated; Res=Resettled/Year of arrival).
NB2: Due to the small size of the community in Portugal, year of arrival may be withheld to protect the identity of participants.

Discussion

This study explored the extent to which pre- and post-migration stressors contribute to psychological distress in a sample of war-exposed Syrians civilians recently arrived in Portugal. Through a combination of standardized instruments and semi-structured interviews, we collected accounts of trauma and distress in refugees arriving through four different streams to obtain diverse pre- and post-migration experiences, as well as address a gap in the existing, mostly quantitative, Syrian refugee trauma literature (Arenliu et al., 2019). We found four clusters of PTEs and/or stressors that impact the mental health of war-affected civilians – war trauma, war daily stressors, stressors frequently encountered by migrant populations, and forced migration stressors –, which help advance our understanding of the psychology-informed obstacles that impact refugees' own integration prospects.

Exposure to war trauma and trauma-related distress were measured using the Harvard Trauma Questionnaire, which, as the most frequently used instrument to assess trauma exposure and distress in refugee populations, helps us contribute to methodological consistency and rigor in the literature (Bogic et al., 2015; Nakeyar & Frewen, 2016). Despite the large student, non-refugee subsample, participants reported overall exposure to concerning numbers of different life-threatening events, and still, these numbers are likely to be an underestimate because the HTQ does not assess frequency of each event. As expected, we found a dose-effect response between exposure to trauma and PTSD severity (Chung et al., 2018), however, the homogeneity of our sample did not allow us to adequately explore group differences by legal status, employment or education which have been found to be associated with distress in resettled refugees (Sonne et al., 2016). It is worth noting that, despite the number of extreme trauma events endorsed by students, they generally exhibited lower levels of psychological distress than refugee protection participants. Additionally, unlike their refugee SOTs counterparts, no student SOTs reported clinically-significant PTSD. These findings may be related to the protective role offered by the routine, sense of purpose, and social status associated with pursuing a higher education degree (Crea, 2006), as well as to students' tendency to minimize their traumas when compared to others' who suffered "the true meaning of the war", which can be protective against PTSD (Hooberman et al., 2010).

A major contribution of this study is the insight it provides into wartime daily stressors. Although the HTQ assesses exposure to cumulative trauma and stressors, including lack of food, shelter or access to medical care, through semi-structured interviews we were able to access the impact of these stressors on participants' daily lives and decision-making processes. Participants reported events that challenged their previous assumptions about life, community, and expectations of security, caused significant distress, and, in some cases, prompted their difficult decision to leave Syria. These findings are consistent with previous studies' suggestions that, like war trauma, daily wartime stressors have the potential to be traumatic (Hynie, 2018; Miller & Rasmussen, 2010) as they shatter previous cognitive structures that gave life meaning, predictability and consistency, thereby causing significant distress (Park, 2010). In line with previous studies with Syrian refugees (Renner et al., 2020), participants also disclosed multiple losses at the cognitive (pre-war status and identity), social (trust in others), and emotional levels (pride), as major sources of anxiety and depressive symptoms. Crucially, in their current inability to envision future goals, participants often cited distressing lessons from the war, with learned uncertainty and hopelessness informing decision-making. These negative cognitive attributions suggest maladaptive responses to war-related stressors, whose reappraisals may need to be addressed soon after arrival to promote psychological adjustment and posttraumatic growth (Kira et al., 2019).

Regarding life in resettlement, as we examined the multiplicity of pervasive challenges faced by participants in Portugal, we found clusters of stressors beyond those commonly experienced by (voluntary) migrant populations (Castañeda et al., 2015) that relate to different aspects of the (forced) refugee experience (Hassan et al., 2016). Grouping them separately rather than as part of a general cluster of post-migration stressors advances our understanding of the determinants of refugee mental health in resettlement and the impact of host countries' policies and practices on refugees' own integration prospects. Take lack of adequate housing, for example. Although a common experience among immigrant populations, it can be experienced very differently by refugees whose housing is initially provided within the strict and sometimes infantilizing rules of state-sponsored refugee assistance programs (Phillimore, 2020) that rob them of control over their lives. In our sample, host condition stressors appeared to be especially distressing for two reasons: an underlying sense of injustice and hurt pride for feeling

deserving of better living conditions, and anger and sometimes despondency for feeling at the whim of the case worker, the agency, and, ultimately, the Portuguese government and its policies. If, on the one hand, refugees benefit from a host of services and material conditions that are meant to help them start rebuilding their lives, on the other hand, being tied to initial assistance programs that effectively put them on a path to "integrate into poverty" (Mulvey, 2013) can be severely distressing and inhibit their ability to envision Portugal as their new country.

Participants shared their disbelief at being forcibly displaced and witnessing powerlessly from afar the continued destruction of their homeland. As members of a family-oriented, collectivist culture (Arenliu et al., 2019; Chung et al, 2018) where group belonging can be both a protective factor (Smeekes, et al., 2017) and a source of significant distress, it was not surprising that the suffering of families and community alike, both at home and around the world, wore heavily on participants' minds. Not surprisingly, we did not anticipate findings related to temporary returns to COO in a study with refugee populations and, therefore, our ability to explore it as a determinant is limited to a few spontaneous accounts of returns from students. Nonetheless, these reports give us a rare glimpse into how internationally-displaced war-affected civilians perceive themselves and their country, family, and community after living in safety and freedom abroad, with participants in our sample reporting severe distress and loss over realizing that they no longer fit into their homeland and needing to adjust their life goals yet again. Future studies should investigate the extent to which war trauma and daily stressors violate meaning structures, how pre-war beliefs and goals are reappraised throughout migration journeys, and the role of community identity and culture in sustaining Syrians' core beliefs, goals and sense of purpose.

Seventy-percent of this study's participants were war-exposed civilians who benefitted from secure pathways to safety, did not benefit from international protection status, and overwhelmingly rejected being identified as "refugees". Although a limitation stemming from non-random sampling, our study provides valuable insight into the experiences of a segment of war-exposed civilians whose trauma history and recovery are largely understudied. Quantitative data were self-reported and assessed retrospectively, which may lead to recall bias, and because we did not examine participants' changed perspectives over time, their accounts may be shaped by events at the time of the interview rather than being an accurate description of their overall experience. Another

limitation is the fact that we assessed PTSD as a measure of trauma-related distress but did not include standardized measures of depression and anxiety, which are typically associated with post-migration stressors (Miller & Rasmussen, 2017). Therefore, the extent to which post-migration stressors contribute to psychological distress in this sample remains unknown. The fact that Phase 2 interviews were not conducted in participants' native Arabic may have precluded participants from fully expressing more complex cognitive processes, although participants' overall high education, ability to reflect on their own experiences, and language proficiency offered exceptionally rich narratives. Despite not asking targeted questions about pre- and post-migration stressors, we are confident that our findings faithfully represent the experiences of the participants in our sample, as, with the exception of narratives of temporary return, we reached data saturation. Future studies should assess how the loss of ability to return to homeland impacts identity formation in resettlement and how shattered goals related to a future return to COO impacts refugees' meaning-making efforts. Although the findings pertain exclusively to Syrian nationals and cannot be generalized to other groups, they give us important insight into the challenges arriving refugee communities face as they settle into their host countries.

In spite of these limitations, and considering the rising number of forcibly displaced persons around the world, the findings from this study have the potential to inform receiving countries' policies and practices. Countries like Portugal, which are often seen as places of safety and opportunity, but not necessarily as refugees' final destination, need to think beyond short-term goals of self-sufficiency and create opportunities for agency and autonomy that are negated by refugees' limited ability to influence their living conditions and, as we witnessed, the overwhelming uncertainty as to what lies ahead. Although we were unable to adequately explore differences in war trauma exposure and distress between students and refugee protection participants, the importance of offering civilians from war-torn countries pathways to safety that prevent them from embarking on dangerous flight journeys cannot be overstated. Minimizing the impact of pre- and post-migration stressors and promoting opportunities for positive reappraisals of learned difficulties will enable refugees to better cope with ongoing stressors, effectively giving them a chance to begin their integration process.

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5

Assessing meaning violations in Syrian refugees using the Global Meaning Violations Scale-ArabV

This chapter is based on the papers

Matos, L., Indart, M.J., Park, C., & Leal, I. (2020). Adapting the Global Meaning Violations Scale for use with Arabic-speaking refugees. *Psicologia, Saúde e Doenças, 21*(1), 3-7. http://dx.doi.org/10.15309/20psd210102

Matos, L., Água, J., Sinval, J., Park, C. L., Indart, M. J., & Leal, I. (2022). Assessing meaning violations in Syrian refugees: A mixed-methods cross-cultural adaptation of the GMVS-ArabV. *Journal of Traumatic Stress,* 1-14. https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.22819

ADAPTING THE GLOBAL MEANING VIOLATIONS SCALE FOR USE WITH ARABIC-SPEAKING REFUGEES

تكييف مقياس الانتهاك المعنى العالمي للاستخدام مع اللاجئين الناطقين بالعربية

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Abstract

Refugees are survivors of extreme, cumulative potentially-traumatic events (PTEs), which can violate their goals, beliefs and sense of purpose (i.e. global meaning) and cause significant psychological distress. Despite being disproportionately affected by PTEs, there are few psychological instruments available in refugees' native languages, and which consider their cultural and traumatic diversity. Our aim is to describe the process of cross-cultural adaption of the Global Meaning Violation Scale (GMVS) for use with Arabic-speaking refugees in resettlement. Methods: Following the ITC Guidelines for Translating and Adapting Tests, we engaged the assistance of psychometry, language, cultural and content experts to translate and adapt the GMVS to Arabic. Results: Experts based in Portugal, Jordan, US and Germany participated in the translation and adaptation process. The scale was considered straightforward and overall cohesive and, by addressing feelings rather than mental health issues, culturally-appropriate. Potential problems related to the complexity of the construct, cultural appropriateness of the "Intimacy (emotional closeness)" item, and use of a Likert Scale. Discussion: The overall process of translating and adapting the GMVS to Arabic was lengthy and resource-intensive. Researchers should carefully consider availability of resources when planning research with culturally diverse populations.

Keywords: refugee trauma; meaning-making; cross-cultural adaptation; scale validation; psychological instruments.

الملخص

يعتبر اللاجئون ناجين من أحداث قاسية، تراكمية، وذات قدرة على ترك صدمة (PTEs)، والتي بدورها قد تنتهك أهدافهم، معتقداتهم، وشعورهم بامتلاك هدف (أي المعنى العالمي) وتسبب لهم ضائقة نفسية بالغة. على الرغم من تأثرها بشكل غير متناسب بتلك الأحداث (PTEs)، هناك بضع أدوات نفسية متوفرة في اللغة الأم للاجئين التي تأخذ بعين الاعتبار تنوع ثقافتهم والصدمات التي تعرضوا لها. هدفنا هو توصيف عملية التكييف عابر الثقافات لمقياس الانتهاك بالمعنى العالمي للاستخدام مع اللاجئين الناطقين باللغة العربية في أماكن إعادة التوطين. المنهجية: وفقًا لإرشادات ITC لاختبارات الترجمة والتكييف، قمنا بإشراك مساعدة خبراء في القياس النفسي، اللغة، الثقافة، والمحتوى، لترجمة مقياس الانتهاك بالمعنى العالمي وتكييفه مع اللغة العربية. النتائج: خبراء في البرتغال، الأردن، الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية وألمانيا شاركوا في عملية الترجمة والتكييف. اعتُبر المقياس واضحاً ومترابط إجمالًا، وملائم ثقافياً من خلال تركيزه على المشاعر بدلًا من قضايا الصحة النفسية. المشاكل المحتملة تعلق بتعقيد بنية الدراسة، الملائمة الثقافية لموضوع "الحميمية (التقارب العاطفي)"، واستخدام مقياس likert. المناقشة: كانت العملية العامة لترجمة وتكييف مقياس الانتهاك بالمعنى العالمي للغة العربية عملية طويلة ومتطلبة للمصادر بشكل مكثف. يجب على الباحثين الأخذ بعين الاعتبار وبعناية توفر المصادر عند تخطيط بحث مع مجموعات متنوعة ثقافياً.

الكلمات المفتاحية: صدمة اللجوء، إيجاد معنى، تكييف عابر للثقافات، التحقق من صحة المقياس، أدوات نفسية.

Introduction

The refugee experience is characterized by forced migration journeys, during which survivors are exposed to extreme, cumulative Potentially-Traumatic Events (PTEs), including war and torture (Steel et al., 2009). These PTEs can be frightening, painful and senseless, and may challenge refugees' deeply-held beliefs about themselves, the world and their place in the world, their life goals and their sense of purpose (i.e. their *global meaning*, Park, 2010). The perceived discrepancy between the meanings survivors of the refugee experience ascribe to their experiences and their global meaning systems can cause intense distress, which is evidenced by the prevalence of high rates of psychopathology in refugee populations, even in postdisplacement (Heeren et al., 2014).

In the wake of the 2015 surge of refugees in the Southern shores of Europe, countries across Europe, including Portugal, saw a significant increase in arrivals of Syrian, Iraqi and Eritrean nationals and other refugee communities (EC, 2015). Besides fleeing war and generalized violence in their countries of origin, these refugees endured long periods of instability in countries of first asylum, and further risked their lives crossing the Mediterranean (Satinsky et al., 2019). Thus, there was an urgency to offer evidence-based, trauma-informed, culturally-competent interventions that promote psychological health as a pre-condition to successful, long-term integration of the refugees.

Central to the process of recovering from trauma is the ability to make meaning of past experiences through cognitive restructuring efforts; these can either change individuals' perceptions of the event to make it congruent with their existing system of beliefs (Park, 2016), or change their set of assumptions about the world to account for the traumatic event. Restoring congruence between experience and meaning systems thereby leads to positive psychological adjustment (Davis et al., 2007).

To better understand trauma survivors' meaning-making processes, Park and colleagues (2016) developed the Global Meaning Violation Scale (GMVS) to assess violations of beliefs and goals. The 13-item scale is succinct, comprising a belief (5 items) and a goal (8 items) subscale. The GMVS was tested in a subset of the US population (college students) and it was considered psychometrically-valid and reliable, indicating promising results to further advance research on meaning-making.

Considering meaning-making a condition to achieve psychological adjustment and the scarcity of psychological instruments available in refugees' native languages, we

translated and culturally adapted the GMVS for use with Arabic-speaking refugees in resettlement.

Method

The International Test Commission (ITC, 2018) establishes 18 guidelines for cross-cultural adaptation of psychological instruments organized in six phases: pre-condition, test development, confirmation, administration, scale scores and interpretation, and documentation. In this article, we describe the first 2 phases; the latter 4 will be addressed in a scale validation article at a later time.

Although the formal Arabic language is the official language in all Arab countries, the GMVS was primarily intended for use with Syrian and Iraqi nationals recently arrived in Portugal; thus, we prioritized the assembly of a committee of experts who could account for specific differences in spoken language, communication methods and idioms of distress (Amro et al., 2019) of these communities. Assembling such a committee was particularly hard to achieve in a country like Portugal, which has very small Syrian and Iraqi communities. Besides providing a small pool of potential language and cultural experts, most refugees are recently-arrived and may still be in significant distress as they try to settle and navigate new systems. They may be suspicious of researchers and may not have sufficient English language knowledge to assist with research tasks. It is worth mentioning that having the research materials available in English rather than Portuguese represented a huge benefit, as it would have been exponentially harder to identify expertise with sufficient Portuguese language fluency.

The expert committee was composed of: two Portuguese-based Syrian translators, one with formal Arabic-English-Arabic translation and interpretation training, currently working as a cultural mediator, and one graduate student with a degree in English literature; one Jordanian psychologist and researcher working on meaning-making issues with refugees in Amman; one Syrian-American mental health researcher working with Syrian communities in Germany and Lebanon; one US-based refugee trauma expert; the first author herself, who has extensive field experience working with survivors of torture and refugee trauma; and one PhD-level psychometrist.

Results

Following the ITC guidelines, we began by (1) obtaining permission from the GMVS' authors to translate, adapt and test it in Arabic-speaking populations with refugee-like experiences. Considering the differences between both cultures and the

anticipated severity and cumulative nature of PTEs, the possibility of the GMVS being a useful tool to a particularly traumatized population was regarded with great excitement by the authors.

The second step (2) pertained to assessing and ensuring that the construct was culturally-appropriate and similarly understood in both languages and cultural groups. As such, we recruited language, cultural and content experts based in Portugal, Jordan, Germany and the US, to whom the construct "global meaning" was separately explained. Each expert was subsequently shown the scale. Despite the complexity of the construct and the level of abstraction required by questions in the scale, there were no concerns about culturally-informed disparities between the construct in its original and in the target language and culture.

The third step (3) entailed minimizing the cultural and linguistic differences, namely participants' potential motivations, their understanding of instructions, and experience with psychological tests or familiarity with rating scales. As a whole, the experts raised four main concerns. The first concern a) pertained to the cultural bias associated with using Likert-type scales (Lee et al., 2002), namely the potential for extreme response bias in Arab populations (Baron-Epel et al., 2010), as something to be mindful of when analyzing the data. Secondly b) one content expert raised the possibility of including descriptors for all 5 Likert points, rather than just the points of anchorage (1 – *not at all* and 5 – *very much*), as the original format may not be sufficiently clear for the target population. Hence, a decision was made to test the scale in Focus Group sessions and reserve time for open-ended questions to monitor participants' reactions. The third concern c) pertained to expected insufficient literacy and lower formal education in arriving refugee communities as well as possible lower level of cognitive ability than the complexity required by the construct and the scale format (Baron-Epel et al., 2010). It was thus determined appropriate for the scale to be administered by a clinician or researcher trained to clarify concepts, items and functioning of the scale, rather than it being exclusively self-administered. The final concern d) included attempting to minimize the impact of other motivations for participation. This was achieved through clarification, both in information sessions for prospective participants and in the study instructions at the beginning of the interviews, that participation in the study and the content of participants' answers would not impact their legal status, prospects for family reunification, access to services or any other aspects of their lives in resettlement.

After meeting the pre-conditions in phase 1, we initiated the test development phase. Step four (4) requires ensuring that the translation and adaptation consider linguistic, psychological and cultural differences through experts with relevant expertise. Prior to addressing culture or language-specific issues (step five), we first attempted to address the diversity and severity of traumas that characterize the refugee experience. As such, with permission from the authors and in consultation with the refugee trauma experts, in the GMVS introductory question, we changed the reference to a single stressor from – *When you think how you felt before and after your most stressful experience* – to – *When you think how you felt before and after the events that led you leave your country*. This was done not only to account for the cumulative nature of trauma, but also to avoid the potential for undue distress by asking participants to “choose” *the* most stressful event; further, the reference to *country* was preferred over the more specific *country of origin* or *home country* as refugees often live in protracted situations (UNHRC, 2018), and may have different points of reference for their forced displacement and traumatic experiences.

The fifth (5) guideline requires appropriate translation designs and procedures to maximize suitability of test adaptation. We combined two translation procedures of forward/backward translation, and double translation and reconciliation with a third independent translator. This method was selected to not only account for the research team’s lack of command of the target language, but also to minimize forward/backward translation bias (Gudmudsson, 2009), which could hinder functional equivalence. One Syrian translator and the Jordanian psychologist-researcher, both Arabic-natives, translated the scale to Arabic. All items were considered easy to translate and the scale clear and understandable. A third translator independently reviewed both Arabic versions, finding very few discrepancies; these discrepancies mostly pertained to the translation of the construct “global meaning” and minor lay terminology in the items. We reconciled both versions by opting for the Jordanian content expert’s suggested translation of the “global meaning”, as *al-maa’na* for meaning, similar to “sense of meaning” used in the Arabic language literature, and *mafhoum* for global, which elicits general ideas or collection of characteristics about meaning. The discrepancies in lay terminology were reconciled per the Syrian experts’ suggestions, since the scale was meant to be tested in Syrian and Iraqi populations, rather than Jordanian. Of note, the independent translator raised concerns about the appropriateness of item 13 “Intimacy (emotional closeness)”,

which she immediately associated with issues of sexuality that may make participants uncomfortable. We subsequently sent the translated scale to the Berlin-based Syrian-American expert for review, confirmation of functional equivalence, and back translation. This subject-matter expert is a native speaker of both languages, and has extensive experience administrating mental health questionnaires to Arab communities. Her findings were as follows: the scale was overall cohesive, contained no absurd items, the questions were straightforward, and the wording was culturally-sensitive by addressing feelings rather than matters of mental health, which she felt could be problematic. She found the scale to be appropriate for use with the target population.

After completing all these steps, the Arabic version of the GMVS was deemed ready to be pilot-tested in Focus Group interviews. Data collected from initial testing will then be incorporated for subsequent confirmation in individual interviews with Arabic-speaking refugees.

Discussion

The overall process of translating and adapting the GMVS for testing in Focus Group interviews with Arabic-speaking refugees was extremely lengthy and at times frustrating. We initiated the process in November 2017 (step 1). After obtaining permission from the authors, we promptly began trying to identify and assemble a committee of experts, and to locate funding sources to pay for translation and interpretation costs. Faced with a lack of in-country language, cultural and content expertise, we made use of our international networks to help locate and connect with colleagues around the world working on similar issues. Following introductions, we cultivated new relationships, adjusted agendas to meet and discuss, and developed new collaborative partnerships. Despite it being unparalleled in how it enriches our work and networks, the process of assembling the expert committee took four months. In March 2018, we were finally ready to initiate step 2. After completing the ITC guidelines as described above, the GMVS, as part of a larger study protocol, was sent to ISPA's Ethics Committee for approval in June 2018. The protocol was approved in September 2018 and the GMVS was ready to be piloted in October 2018, 10 months after initiating the process of cross-cultural adaptation.

It is possible that at times we were overly cautious in some of the steps we took to ensure adequate translation, thus unnecessarily extending our timeline. An example of this is having opted for combining two translation methods, where back translation may

not have been necessary. However, we determined that the limitations in target language fluency within the research team warranted that additional step (Epstein et al., 2015), and that the risks of inadequate translation and adaptation of an instrument (Fasfous et al., 2017) that is meant to be used with and to help such deeply traumatized populations was not worth skipping that step.

The main contributions of this study are two-fold: on the one hand, by detailing the methodological steps and rigor we took in adapting the GMVS, we address concerns in the literature about the lack of detailed reporting of the cross-cultural adaptation process and the significant number of poorly adapted tests being used with Arab populations (Uysal-Bozkir et al., 2013). On the other hand, it is crucial that researchers working with hard-to-reach populations that are culturally and linguistically different carefully consider the availability of resources when planning their study designs. Work plans should be sufficiently flexible to accommodate time, funding and other resource demands. Because researchers and experts cannot anticipate all problems encountered by participants, it is essential to conduct small try-outs with the target population, namely through focus groups, prior to test administration. Without appropriate cross-cultural adaptation and subsequent validation of a scale's psychometric properties, the validity of research results may lead to false conclusions.

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ASSESSING MEANING VIOLATIONS IN SYRIAN REFUGEES: A MIXED-METHODS CROSS-CULTURAL ADAPTATION OF THE GLOBAL MEANING VIOLATIONS SCALE–ARABV

تقييم انتهاك المعنى عند اللاجئين السوريين: تكييف عابر الثقافة ذو منهجية مختلطة لمقياس الانتهاك معنى العالمي بالنسخة العربية GMVS-ArabV

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Abstract

Refugees are disproportionately affected by extreme traumatic events that can violate core beliefs and life goals (i.e., global meaning) and cause significant distress. This mixed-methods study used an exploratory sequential design to assess meaning violations in a sample of Syrian refugees living in Portugal. For this purpose, we cross-culturally adapted the Global Meaning Violations Scale (GMVS) for use with Arabic-speaking refugees. In total, 43 war-affected Syrian adults participated in the two-phase study. Participants completed measures of trauma and narrated violations as they filled out the newly adapted GMVS-ArabV. GMVS-ArabV validity evidence based on response processes was investigated through Phase 1 focus groups (FGs; $n = 2$), whereas data from Phase 2 cognitive interviews ($n = 38$) were used to preliminarily explore the measure's internal structure through descriptive statistics as well as culture- and trauma-informed content evidence through thematic analysis. The results suggested highest goal ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 1.46$) and lowest belief ($M = 2.38$, $SD = 1.59$) violations of educational goals and religious beliefs, respectively. Themes related to stressors, item formulation, response scale, and the global meaning construct suggested that (a) beliefs and goals can be differentially violated by different stressors; (b) much like war trauma, including torture, daily stressors can additionally shatter pretrauma global meaning; and (c) refugees reappraise meaning and suffer violations anew throughout their migration journeys. The GMVS-ArabV offers a promising tool for exploring shattered cognitions in refugees and informs evidence-based approaches to trauma recovery and psychological adjustment in postmigration settings.

Keywords: Syrian refugees; war trauma; meaning-making; posttraumatic growth; higher education program for refugees; trauma treatment; scale validation.

الملخص

يتأثر اللاجئون بشكل غير متناسب بأحداث ذات صدمة قوية وقادرة على انتهاك معتقدات اساسية واهداف الحياة، اي المعنى العالمي، وتسبب ضائقة كبيرة. قامت هذه الدراسة مختلطة المنهج باستخدام تصميم تسلسلي استكشافي لتقييم انتهاكات المعنى عند عينة من المواطنين السوريين المتضررين من الحرب والمقيمين في البرتغال. لهذه الغاية، قمنا بتكييف مقياس الانتهاك المعنى العالمي (GMVS) ثقافياً لاستخدامه مع اللاجئين الناطقين باللغة العربية. شارك ٤٣ بالغاً سورياً ممن تضرروا من الحرب في الدراسة على مرحلتين. اكمل المشاركون مقاييس الصدمة ورووا انتهاكات المعنى عن طريق ملء مقياس انتهاكات المعنى الشامل-النسخة العربية GMVS-ArabV. تم التحقيق في أدلة صحة GMVS-ArabV المستندة إلى عمليات الاستجابة من خلال مجموعات التركيز في المرحلة الأولى (FG؛ 2 = n)، في حين تم استخدام البيانات من المقابلات المعرفية من المرحلة الثانية (n = 38) لاستكشاف الهيكل الداخلي بشكل مبدئي من خلال الإحصائيات الوصفية، والثقافة- وأدلة المحتوى الواعية بالصدمات من خلال التحليل المواضيعي. أشارت النتائج إلى أعلى انتهاكات الهدف (M = 3.51; SD = 1.46) وأدنى انتهاكات المعتقدات (M = 3.47; SD = 1.54) للأهداف التعليمية والمعتقدات الدينية، على التوالي. تؤشر الموضوعات المتعلقة بالضغوطات، صياغة العناصر، مقياس الاستجابة، وبناء المعنى العالمي إلى ما يلي: يمكن أن تنتهك المعتقدات والأهداف بشكل مختلف من خلال الضغوط المختلفة؛ مثل صدمات الحرب، بما في ذلك التعذيب، يمكن أن تؤدي الضغوطات اليومية إلى تحطيم المعنى العالمي قبل الصدمة؛ واللاجئون يعيدون تقييم المعنى ويعانون من الانتهاكات من جديد خلال رحلات الهجرة. يقدم GMVS-ArabV أداة واعدة لاستكشاف الإدراك المحطم لدى اللاجئين ويوجه النهج القائمة على الأدلة للتعافي من الصدمات والتكيف النفسي في أوضاع ما بعد الهجرة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اللاجئون السوريون؛ صدمة الحرب؛ ايجاد المعنى؛ نمو ما بعد الصدمة؛ برنامج التعليم العالي للاجئين؛ معالجة الصدمة؛ مقياس التحقق.

Introduction

As survivors of forced migration processes, refugees are disproportionately affected by cumulative potentially traumatic events (PTEs) that occur before, during, and following their flight to safety (Porter & Haslam, 2005). Near-death experiences, armed conflict, torture, and repeat losses can violate refugees' assumptions about themselves, the world, and their place in the world (ter Heide, 2017) and cause significant and persistent distress (Bogic et al., 2015). Yet, despite the extreme and cumulative nature of trauma in this population, studies have shown that, much like Western survivors of single-incident PTEs, refugees are also able to make meaning of their past and perceive posttraumatic growth (Chan et al., 2016). However, the mechanisms through which these survivors rebuild shattered cognitive structures are largely understudied, which is problematic given the centrality of meaning-making for posttraumatic recovery (Lim et al., 2015; Park et al., 2016).

When faced with events that are perceived as random, senseless, and terrifying, individuals often respond by trying to assign meaning to those experiences, thereby restoring a sense that the world is safe and just and their lives are purposeful (Brown, 2008; Park et al., 2016). Park's (2010) integrated meaning-making model outlines the process of trauma recovery based on the assumption that perceived discrepancies between the appraised meaning of a PTE (i.e., situational meaning) and one's core beliefs and life goals (i.e., global meaning) cause significant distress and require meaning-making efforts to reduce such discrepancies. Psychological adjustment can, thus, be achieved either by altering the situational appraisal or restoring shattered beliefs and goals.

The empirical work on meaning and meaning-making has long lagged behind the richness of theoretical models, namely due to the challenges of operationalizing such complex and inherently personal and subjective experiences (Park et al., 2017). Although several instruments indirectly address aspects of meaning violations, there is a dearth of psychometrically sound measures for specifically assessing the degree to which survivors' core cognitive structures were either shattered or able to integrate extreme stressors. To understand the impact of trauma exposure on specific cognitions and advance the evidence base on the role shattered beliefs and goals play in posttraumatic distress and psychological adjustment, Park and colleagues (2016) developed the Global Meaning Violations Scale (GMVS). This 13-item scale asks respondents to reflect on how they felt prior to and after an index stressful experience and subsequently report how

much that event may have violated their core beliefs and ability to achieve their life goals. Although the GMVS was validated in a sample of American undergraduate students who overwhelmingly reported nonextreme, mostly academic-related stressors, the measure's authors suggest that it could offer a brief, easy-to-use, easily adaptable, and conceptually sound instrument to advance posttraumatic psychological adjustment research and practice.

War and generalized conflict constitute some of the most severe assaults on meaning and one's sense of continuity and predictability, which can lead survivors to fundamentally revise their previous worldviews (Silove, 2013). Since 2011, the war in Syria has caused the displacement of 13,500,000 civilians both within and outside its borders (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2021). The associated dynamics of conflict and protracted displacement have negatively and severely impacted the mental health of Syrian refugees, with studies indicating a prevalence of posttraumatic stress disorder as high as 43% in this population along with a high prevalence of both depression and anxiety (Ben Farhat et al., 2018; Cheung Chung et al., 2018). Studies with Syrian and other refugee populations have shown that the perceived shattering of pretrauma worldviews is a precursor to cognitive processing aimed at reappraising shattered cognitions (Chan et al., 2016; Kira et al., 2019; Zbidat et al., 2020) and is expected to occur at different points throughout displacement journeys (Matos et al., 2018). However, little is known about cognitive-specific violations in refugees and how these perceived violations impact posttraumatic psychological adjustment.

Researchers and clinicians working with forcibly displaced persons have long struggled to access reliable, valid, and culturally appropriate psychological instruments that accurately reflect the scope of refugees' experiences and symptom manifestation (Bogic et al., 2015). Issues of language, diversity of trauma, and cultural and linguist backgrounds, combined with the urgency to provide care and collect data that supports programmatic funding and interventions, often make it impractical for practitioners to use instruments that have been adapted for a specific refugee population (Makhoul et al., 2018). Further, like many other psychological constructs, the meaning-making theoretical framework is informed by Western cultural experiences and construed as an essentially individual process undergone by survivors of single-incident, individual-level PTEs; thus, its applicability to non-Western survivors of multiple, often concurrent, community-affecting PTEs needs to be tested. This is especially important when incorporating

standardized self-report instruments into studies with populations for whom these instruments were not originally designed. Calls for methodological consistency and rigor, as well as for the incorporation of qualitative methodology in the cross-cultural adaptation of psychological instruments (De Silva et al., 2020), are rooted in concerns over measurement errors, wrong diagnoses, stigmatization, and pathologizing symptoms and behaviors that may otherwise be normative and culturally appropriate (Arnetz et al., 2013; Fasfous et al., 2017).

Given these concerns and the centrality of meaning violations for psychological adjustment, our primary objective was to conduct a mixed-methods, cross-sectional study with an exploratory sequential design (Fetters et al., 2013) to assess meaning discrepancies in war-affected Syrians. To that end, our secondary objective was to cross-culturally adapt the GMVS for use with Arabic-speaking refugees. Quantitatively, we aimed to assess the validity evidence of the newly adapted GMVS-ArabV and measure violations of core beliefs and goals. Qualitatively, our objective was to explore culture-, language- and trauma-informed violations. Finally, we aimed to use this mixed-methods approach to capture participants' understanding of the GMVS-ArabV items and rating scale as well as their cognitive processing as they accessed perceived violations.

Method

Participants

The present study included two independent samples of war-affected Syrian adults (i.e., 18 years of age or older) living in urban communities across Portugal. Participants were required to be (a) an Arabic speaker and (b) living in Portugal for a minimum of 6 months; in Phase 2, participants were additionally required to be (c) able to hold a conversation in English or Portuguese. A total of 45 individuals agreed to participate in the two-phase study. Four women and one man participated in two separate Phase 1 focus groups (FGs) in Lisbon; each FG included two or three participants. The mean participant age was 37.4 years (*SD* = 12.2, range: 29–59 years), and participants had been resettled in Portugal from Egypt (*n* = 2) or relocated from Greece (*n* = 3) after a mean of 27.8 months (*SD* = 18.8) in transit. All participants had traveled with their children and identified as Sunni Muslims, and they reported their highest level of educational attainment as primary school (*n* = 1), middle school (*n* = 1), secondary school (*n* = 2), or an associate degree (*n* = 1). In Phase 2, a total of 21 men and 19 women participated in 40 cognitive interviews

conducted across the country. Two men became distressed during their interviews and dropped out of the study. Thus, the final Phase 2 sample consisted of 38 individuals between the ages of 19 and 37 years (M = 26.9 years, SD = 4.8), 30 of whom (78.9%) were beneficiaries of higher education programs for refugees (i.e., student-refugees), such as the Global Platform for Syrian Students; the remaining eight individuals (21.0%) were relocated refugees (n = 5) and spontaneous asylum-seekers (n = 3). The highest level of formal educational attainment was reported as a doctoral degree (n = 2), master's degree (n = 10), bachelor's degree (n = 18), associate's degree (n = 2), and high school diploma (n = 6). Fourteen participants (36.8%) had arrived in Portugal 11–13 months before the interview, and their overall length of stay in the country was approximately 3 years (M = 40.2 months, SD = 27.3). Family-inherited religious identity was largely Muslim (n = 32), including Sunni (n = 16), Alawite (n = 7), Ismaili (n = 2), and nonspecific (n = 7); four participants were Christian, and two were Druze. Four individuals identified as atheists, and one was a self-reported agnostic.

Procedure

This study was part of a larger research project examining posttraumatic meaning-making trajectories in Syrian refugees living in postmigration settings. To address our primary research objectives, we used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, which has been deemed appropriate to capture the diversity of mental health issues in refugees (Weine et al., 2014), to access complex cognitive processing without imposing Western norms (Bartholomew & Brown, 2012). The study had two phases of data collection. In Phase 1, FGs were held in October and December 2018 to test meaning constructs, examine the validity evidence of the GMVS-ArabV based on response processes, and capture a range of participant experiences. In Phase 2, cognitive interviews were held across the country between January and May 2019 to preliminarily assess evidence based on internal structure and content, and explore detailed individual accounts of global meaning violations.

A nonprobabilistic convenience sample was recruited among Syrian refugee and war-affected communities in Portugal. Outreach was done through interpreter-facilitated information sessions in resettlement organizations in Lisbon (Phase 1) and the distribution of Arabic-language study materials through social networks (Phases 1 and 2). Phase 1 recruitment yielded only two small, self-organized FGs, as prospective participants alluded to suspicion of the group setting, citing concerns, such as the

presence of an interpreter, who would likely be from the same community, and community research fatigue as reasons for not enrolling. Participants were informed of the study purpose and the voluntary nature of their partaking, signed consent forms, and were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality of their information. Due to the sensitive and potentially retraumatizing content of the material discussed, participants were briefed on normal reactions to the retelling of their stories (ter Heide et al., 2016) and, if needed, offered the possibility of referral for pro bono psychosocial support. The lead researcher, who is Portuguese-American and has extensive experience in screening for trauma and torture in refugees, conducted all Phase 1 FGs and Phase 2 cognitive interviews, and the study was approved by ISPA – Instituto Universitário Ethics Committee (Ref. D/004/09/2018).

FGs were conducted in the offices of community organizations in Lisbon and assisted by Arabic language interpreters, who were briefed on content, role, and expectations. Participants were given paper versions of the questionnaires to fill out individually. This was followed by a group discussion to investigate culturally informed differences in the constructs of "global meaning" and "meaning violation" as well as participants' reactions to the questionnaire, namely how they felt while completing it, the appropriateness of the language used, item formulation, scale administration, and item ratings. The group discussions, which each lasted 90-min, were audio-recorded.

In Phase 2, 38 individual interviews were held in the districts of Braga and Oporto (n = 14) in the north; Évora (n = 1) in the south; and Aveiro, Coimbra, and Lisbon (n = 17) in central Portugal. Participants and researchers met in quiet spaces (e.g., university offices), and interviews lasted an average of 90 min each. Due to concerns related to confidentiality and anonymity expressed during Phase 1 recruitment, cognitive interviews were conducted without the presence of an interpreter, in English or Portuguese, per participant preference. Participants were given the opportunity to narrate belief and goal violations (i.e., qualitative assessment) during this phase. All study materials were available in Arabic as well as English and Portuguese to ensure language consistency, and questionnaires were administered as structured interviews. The administration and subsequent discussion of all GMVS-ArabV interviews were audio-recorded.

Measures

Sociodemographic Characteristics

All participants completed a questionnaire in Arabic constructed for the purposes of the study to collect sociodemographic information, including gender, formal education, employment or legal status, and sections on flight journey and life in resettlement.

Trauma Exposure

The Harvard Trauma Questionnaire (HTQ; Shoeb et al., 2007) is the most consistently used assessment of refugee trauma and has been validated for use across different refugee populations (Sigvardsdotter et al., 2016). We used Parts 1 and 5 to determine exposure to trauma events (45 items) and torture history (34 items), respectively, through "yes" or "no" responses. Examples of trauma events include "witnessing mass execution of civilians" (Item 14) or "being forced to inform on someone placing them at risk of injury or death" (Item 27), and torture was defined as, "while in captivity, you received deliberate physical or systematic infliction of physical and/or mental suffering." The HTQ provided a baseline for participants to reflect on sources of meaning violation.

Meaning Violations

The original GMVS (Park et al., 2016) assesses violations related to respondents' "most stressful experience" across three dimensional subscales: Belief Violation (e.g., "violation of your sense that God is in control"), Intrinsic Goal Violation (e.g., "interference with your ability to accomplish self-acceptance"), and Extrinsic Goal Violation (e.g., "interference with your ability to accomplish educational achievement"). Items are rated on a 5-point ordinal scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). Through confirmatory factor analysis, Park and colleagues (2016) found the scale to have an acceptable fit and Cronbach's alpha values were determined acceptable for each subscale: Belief Violation, Cronbach's α = .72; Intrinsic Goal Violation, Cronbach's α = .66; Extrinsic Goal Violation, Cronbach's α = .61.

To cross-culturally adapt the GMVS for use with Arabic-speaking refugees, we conducted a rigorous scale translation and adaptation process following International Test Commission (ITC) guidelines (2018). A multidisciplinary committee of seven experts proficient in Arabic, Arab and Syrian cultures, the content and construct under study, and psychometric properties assessed construct equivalence in the target population, and we

used a combination of translation designs to maximize the suitability of the adapted instrument for the target population. Overall, the committee found that (a) the Arabic version of the GMVS (i.e., GMVS-ArabV) was appropriate for use with the population, contained simple language addressing feelings rather than potentially stigmatizing mental health issues, and did not include any "absurd" or meaningless items; (b) the introductory question should be modified to encompass the complexity of refugee trauma by setting the stem of items to refer to "the events that led you to leave your country" versus the original wording, "your most stressful experience"; and (c) there was a need to monitor for potential response bias associated with using an ordinal scale with Arab populations. Detailed committee findings are described elsewhere (Matos et al., 2020). Following initial adaptation, the GMVS-ArabV (see Supplementary Materials) was deemed ready to be tested for content and internal structure.

Data analysis

Quantitative Data

We used descriptive statistics to summarize data on the demographic and trauma exposure characteristics of the full sample. Analyses of the statistical and psychometric properties of the GMVS-ArabV were performed using Phase 2 (n = 38) data. Descriptive statistics were calculated for individual items and subscales. Because the sample was small and did not meet the requirements to test factor structure, Pearson's correlation coefficients (r) were calculated between items as well as between the original GMVS dimensions. Item sensitivity was explored through skewness and kurtosis, with absolute skewness values greater than 3 and absolute kurtosis values greater than 7 indicating a severe violation of the assumption of normality (Marôco, 2021). No missing data were imputed. Quantitative data analysis was conducted using R (R Core Team, 2021), and an alpha level of .05 was considered statistically significant. The descriptive statistics were obtained using the *skimr* package (McNamara et al., 2021).

Qualitative Data

Phase 1 and Phase 2 audio recordings were transcribed, and participants' names were removed and coded. The data were managed and analyzed in two stages using MAXQDA software (VERBI Software, 2019). At the end of Phase 1, FG transcripts were reviewed for comments on instrument clarity and/or appropriateness and used to preliminarily assess face validity and inform minor adjustments to the GMVS-ArabV

prior to subsequent testing in Phase 2 (ITC, 2018). At the end of Phase 2, FG and cognitive interview transcripts were combined and analyzed as one dataset using a bottom-up approach to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis focused on issues of language, item formats, the rating scale, and the appropriateness of the instrument to the cultural and traumatic experiences of participants. The first author conducted a first in-depth reading of all transcripts and created the initial coding, which was then reviewed and discussed with the third author. The first and third authors, who are trained in thematic analysis, subsequently coded the transcripts using the thematic map, and themes and codes were iteratively discussed until a final map was reached. The findings from this thematic analysis subsequently informed GMVS-ArabV item responses and were merged narratively.

Results

Quantitative Results

PTE Exposure

The 43 participants comprising the full sample endorsed a total of 552 potentially meaning-defying events (M = 12.6, SD = 7.3), as assessed using HTQ Part 1. The most common events included witnessing the “shelling, burning, or razing of residential areas or fields” and being “confined to home because of chaos and violence outside” (n = 35, 81.4%); the “murder or violent death of a friend” (n = 30, 69.8%); and “serious physical injury of family member or friend from combat situation or landmine” (n = 28, 65.1%). Six men also disclosed being tortured and reported an additional 76 torture events (M = 12.7, SD = 8.4) in HTQ Part 5, including forced positions (n = 6), blunt-force trauma (n = 4), electrocutions (n = 2), and sexual abuse or rape (n = 5).

GMVS-ArabV Validity Evidence Based on Internal Structure

The full range of the 5-point ordinal scale was used for all 13 items, and all items presented absolute skewness values smaller than 1 and absolute kurtosis values smaller or equal to 1.5, thereby indicating no severe univariate normality violations. There were statistically significant correlations between the original scale’s proposed goal dimensions (i.e., violations of intrinsic and extrinsic goals), r = .443, p < .001, but no correlations emerged between belief violations and intrinsic goal violations, r = .276, p = .094, or extrinsic goal violations, r = .281, p = .087. Mean item scores ranged from 2.13 (SD = 1.40) for Item 8 (i.e., physical health) to 3.51 (SD = 1.48) for Item 10 (i.e., educational

achievement). Pearson's interitem correlations and item distributional properties are reported in detail in Tables 6 and 7.

Table 6 Interitem Pearson correlations for the Global Meaning Violations Scale–ArabV

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Fair and just world	–	.30	.18	−.03	.02	−.11	−.04	−.17	.24	.21	−.07	−.03	.19
2. Other forces in control		–	.29	.22	.31	.13	.14	−.11	−.06	.35*	.06	−.02	.10
3. God in control			–	.16	.04	.14	.34*	−.10	.06	.37*	.21	.02	.02
4. Self in control				–	.33*	.28	.39*	.17	.31	.05	.32	.06	.12
5. World good & safe					–	.23	.17	−.01	.14	.14	.17	−.01	.08
6. Social support						–	.67**	.19	.39*	.23	.41**	.15	.20
7. Self-acceptance							–	.34*	.34*	.27	.54**	.24	.19
8. Physical health								–	.28	.04	.13	.03	−.20
9. Inner peace									–	.11	.16	.10	.11
10. Education										–	.42**	.30	.28
11. Career											–	.30	.06
12. Creativity												–	.32*
13. Intimacy													–

Note: $n = 38$.
$^{*}p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$.

Table 7 Item distributional properties for the Global Meaning Violations Scale–ArabV

Item	$n_{missing}$	*M*	*SD*	Min.	P_{25}	*Mdn*	P_{75}	Max.	Histogram	*SEM*	*CV*	Mode	Skew	Kurtosis
Item 1	0	2.92	1.48	1	1.00	3.0	4.00	5		0.24	0.51	4	−0.18	−1.50
Item 2	0	3.47	1.54	1	2.25	4.0	5.00	5		0.25	0.44	5	−0.66	−1.10
Item 3	1	2.38	1.59	1	1.00	2.0	4.00	5		0.26	0.67	1	0.73	−1.13
Item 4	0	3.16	1.37	1	2.00	3.0	4.00	5		0.22	0.43	3	−0.03	−1.17
Item 5	0	3.08	1.22	1	2.00	3.0	4.00	5		0.20	0.40	3	−0.16	−0.70
Item 6	0	3.42	1.43	1	2.00	3.5	5.00	5		0.23	0.42	5	−0.29	−1.33
Item 7	0	3.16	1.48	1	2.00	3.0	4.75	5		0.24	0.47	5	−0.13	−1.38
Item 8	0	2.13	1.40	1	1.00	1.5	3.00	5		0.23	0.66	1	0.98	−0.42
Item 9	0	2.92	1.12	1	2.00	3.0	4.00	5		0.18	0.38	3	0.04	−0.67
Item 10	1	3.51	1.48	1	2.00	4.0	5.00	5		0.24	0.42	5	−0.62	−1.07
Item 11	0	3.24	1.48	1	2.00	3.0	5.00	5		0.24	0.46	5	−0.23	−1.29
Item 12	0	3.11	1.47	1	2.00	3.0	4.00	5		0.24	0.47	4	−0.20	−1.37
Item 13	0	2.92	1.51	1	1.25	3.0	4.00	5		0.25	0.52	1	0.04	−1.45

Note: n = 38. Min. = minimum; P_{25} = 25th percentile; P_{75} = 75th percentile; Max. = maximum; SEM = standard error of the mean; CV = coefficient of variation.

Qualitative Results

GMVS-ArabV Validity Evidence Based on Response Processes

The concept of holding beliefs and goals that give people a sense of purpose (i.e., global meaning) and the ability of war-related PTEs to disrupt those beliefs (i.e., meaning violation) fit FG participants' understanding of the world and their lives. Regarding the GMVS-ArabV, participants found (a) the language simple and easy to understand; (b) the introductory question, aggregating PTEs instead of requiring respondents to elect their most distressing event, to be attuned to the complexity of their experiences; and (c) the need to characterize points 2–4 of the 5-point ordinal scale, rather than just points 1 and 5, per the English language original. The latter subsequently led to the characterization of points 2–4 as "*slightly* [قليلا]", "*moderately* [متوسط]", and "*a lot* [كثيرا]," respectively. With respect to GMVS-ArabV administration, all but one FG participant requested assistance from the interpreter or moderator for either item clarification (e.g., wanting to know who "other forces" were or which type of "social support and community" was being invoked) and/or showed a need to reflect aloud on their own processes while completing the scale. This evidenced that, although the language and item formulation were straightforward, the level of abstraction invoked proved complex for participants to engage with on their own. Thus the study's research committee decided to move forward with the adapted scale in Phase 2 and determined the need to have it be researcher- rather than self-administered. GMVS administration included guidelines to validate participants' own interpretation of certain aspects of meaning as well as to help ground those struggling with the level of abstraction invoked. The latter was often achieved by steering the participant back to baseline (e.g., "Did you feel that the world was fair before the war? Do you feel it is fair now? Did it change? How much did it change?") or by asking them to think back on their own experience to avoid sharing general impressions. Table 8 includes a summary of the GMVS-ArabV cross-cultural adaptation and testing process.

Table 8

Global Meaning Violations Scale (GMVS)–ArabV cross-cultural adaptation following International Test Commission 2018 guidelines

Procedure	Results
	Adaptation
Secure GMVS authors' permission	Authorization granted in November 2017
Identify and assemble a committee of experts	Seven-member committee based in Portugal, Jordan, Germany, and United States
Assess *meaning* construct in the target population	Existing construct in the Arabic language literature: *al-maa'na* (meaning)
Minimize cultural and linguistic differences irrelevant for questionnaire application	Study protocol stresses that participation in the study or content of responses has no impact on legal status, housing, or other living conditions
Consider linguistic, psychological, and cultural differences	Refugee trauma-informed reference to "events that led you to leave your country" as baseline stressor
Ensure appropriate translation designs and procedures	Combination of forward/backward and double translation/reconciliation
	Validity evidence based on response processes–Focus Groups[a]
Evidence of test instructions and item content with similar meaning	Qualitative findings: Language and item formulation straightforward and appropriate
	Validity evidence based on internal structure–Cognitive interviews (*n = 38*)
Evidence supporting norms and validity of the adapted version	Acceptable distribution of all items
	Strongest interitem correlations between Items 6 and 7; Items 6 and 11; Items 11 and 7; and Items 11 and 10
	Statistically significant interdimensional correlations between violations of intrinsic and extrinsic goals
	Unable to test factor structure due to sample size
Reliability	Not assessed due to sample size
Appropriate design and data analysis procedures when linking score scales	Unable to equate scores across the two language versions due to sample size
	Validity evidence based on test content – Total sample (n = 43)
Suitability of item formats, rating scales, modes of administration, and other procedures	Qualitative findings: different stressors violate different aspects of meaning, items needing additional clarification and/or were "absurd", ordinal scale used as measure of strength rather than violation, direction of change, hierarchy of needs and meaning systems, difficult questions, still-evolving beliefs and goals

[a] Two FGs, one of which had two participants and one of which had three participants.

Validity Evidence Based on Content and Suitability for the Target Population

The baseline for meaning violations was set by the GMVS-ArabV introductory question. As participants reflected aloud on their item responses, we identified eight themes pertaining to: potentially meaning-defying stressors (Theme 1: Different stressors violate different meaning cognitions); scale items (Theme 2: "Requests for item clarification" and Theme 3: "Absurd item"); response scale (Theme 4: "Measure of strength instead of violation" and Theme 5: "Unclear direction of change"); and the operationalization of the global meaning violation construct (Theme 6: "Hierarchy of needs and meaning systems," Theme 7: "Difficult questions," and Theme 8: "Evolving beliefs and goals"). Themes are described in detail below.

Potentially Meaning-Defying Stressors. "I feel that what happened in Syria changed the image of the world to me." This statement by a 32-year-old female participant testified to the usefulness of anchoring a pre- and posttrauma framework on the war as the point of discontinuity in Syrians' lives. In addition to altering worldviews, the war also violated overall goals, articulated as "dreams" by a 36-year-old participant who explained that he had had dreams to "build [his] own house, get married, make a family, improve [his] position at work," but when the war started, he realized "none of this [he] could reach." However, as participants went through each item on the scale, it was apparent that "Different stressors [had the ability to] violate different meaning cognitions" (Theme 1), with some refugees being able to identify a specific event or type of event that had shattered specific cognitive structures. For example, one 19-year-old student-refugee shared how wartime daily stressors progressively disrupted her perception of being in control of her life, noting that, "in Syria, every hour something happened. No electricity, no water…everything was always changing. Now [in Portugal], I have more control." Others, like a 23-year-old man, could identify the precise event that triggered questions about his beliefs in justice and God's benevolence: "When the Jordanian pilot was captured by ISIS and videos of him being burned alive were distributed, at that moment I began questioning if God was fair, if the world was fair."

GMVS Items. Despite the simplicity of the language and item formulation, participants often "Requested item clarification" (Theme 2) stemming from two subthemes: (a) the timeline of disruption (e.g., "in my country or in Portugal?"), where some respondents were able to identify repeated violations and reappraisals at different points in their journeys, and (b) items being too abstract and open to interpretation,

particularly for Item 2 regarding other forces, with participants inquiring if that meant "divine forces," "forces of politics and finance," "the regime," or even their Portuguese host organization.

Occasionally, participants identified "Absurd items" (Theme 3) within their belief system. In this respect, questions about religious beliefs (Item 3) were expectedly problematic for respondents who identified as atheist or agnostic, with one 24-year-old female student-refugee promptly stating, "No, God is not [in control]." When asked if she believed God was in control before, she responded "No, absolutely not. Because He doesn't exist! [laughter]." Another more extreme reaction came from two female FG participants, who felt unable to complete the Belief Violations subscale and discern separate beliefs due to the centrality of God to their global meaning system, with one woman declaring, "All the questions [Items 1–5] have the same answer. They are just asked differently."

Response Scale. The process of reflecting on changes to one's global meaning required participants to assess their current beliefs and goals, which often suggested that the ordinal scale was readily used as a "Measure of strength instead of violation" (Theme 4). Some participants made requests for clarification (e.g., "Does '1' mean that the world is not fair?"), whereas others indicated a number on the scale as a measure of their current belief only to then be gently redirected by the interviewer. When asked about his religious beliefs being violated, one young man replied, "No, not at all. Put a 1." When asked to clarify whether he was stating that this belief had not changed or that God is not in control, he replied, "No, [God] is not in control at all. Well, before I thought that [God] was in control, but now I don't. So maybe I should put a 5."

On occasion, the response scale felt insufficient to reflect the extent of participants' experiences. In addition to measuring the violation, some participants wanted to define the "Direction of change" (Theme 5), with one respondent stating, "It's the opposite! I gain more [community and social support] skills!" and another, a graduate of a doctoral program, going as far as adding "+" and "-" to his answers to indicate a positive or negative change, noting, "Hmm…I feel that the world is less safe. Should I add a minus in this case?"

Global Meaning Violation. Three themes attested to the difficulty of operationalizing meaning-related constructs and provided insight into the potential challenges of self-administration as well as respondents' thought processes. Having fled a

war and being in the process of adjusting to life in resettlement, respondents articulated a "Hierarchy of needs and meaning systems" (Theme 6), which helped justify why some did not feel ready to reflect on the deeper changes that the war had inflicted on their cognitive structures. Faced with the questionnaire, a 32-year-old graduate student–refugee explained that his strategy to survive was to avoid "thinking about the things [he] could not control," whereas another described the need to organize his life—and shattered beliefs—in "boxes," which was where he, a former practicing Catholic, also kept the belief in God until it could be reappraised:

> Sometimes the boxes fall from the shelf on your head and suddenly you have to deal with it! I try to put [the box] back on the shelf for another time. Sometimes I feel like, "OK, now I can't do anything. I have to rest, I have to relax until these thoughts go away. Then I can function." I mean, it's not healthy but what can I do?

Overall, GMVS-ArabV items were paradoxically simply worded and hard to evoke: "Difficult questions" (Theme 7) that elicited complex reflections that participants had often not yet entertained (e.g., "Hmm… is the world fair? I never thought about it") or were not allowed to entertain (e.g., "It is not up for us to question [whether God is in control]").

Finally, as survivors of refugee trauma, participants also perceived the evolving and unresolved nature of meaning discrepancies, which made it hard to quantify violations. Theme 8, which captured "Evolving beliefs and goals," included two subthemes: (a) unresolved discrepancies (e.g., "Do I feel that the world is still safe and fair? Yes, I do. Did it change? Slightly. Because sometimes it goes back and forth, but it still goes back to being good") and (b) the perception that beliefs and goals evolve with time and context. For example, regarding Item 8 on goals related to self-acceptance, a 25-year-old, recently arrived student-refugee commented, "My ability to accept myself? [It changed] very much. Extremely! It's better now. It was really good before the war, and during the war it was really bad, but now I feel that I accept myself again."

Discussion

The present study employed an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design to assess postwar meaning violations in Arabic-speaking Syrian refugees using a cross-culturally adapted version of the GMVS (Park et al., 2016). Participants were Syrian adults living in urban communities across Portugal, for whom the war constituted a baseline for disruptions of previous assumptions of predictability, continuity, and

controllability that informed their prewar global meaning structures. Participants additionally endorsed exposure to multiple extreme PTEs and stressors, including torture (n = 6 men), that violated specific cognitive structures. In our sample, which was largely composed of student-refugees, the results from descriptive analyses indicated highest perceived violations of goals related to educational aspirations and to community and social support, and highest belief violations related to assumptions about controllability by other, outside forces. Qualitative results suggested that, although the GMVS-ArabV language and item formulation were straightforward and appropriate and helped facilitate access to perceived violations, the operationalization of such a complex and inherently subjective construct remains a significant challenge. Given the linguistic, cultural, and traumatic differences between the original and target populations, rather than aiming to produce an instrument equivalent to its original, with predictive validity, the GMVS-ArabV allowed us to preliminarily explore posttraumatic violations of specific cognitions and advance the evidence-based understanding of meaning violations through a brief, conceptually sound psychometric tool.

This study had two major strengths. The first pertains to its contribution to the literature on the cross-cultural adaptation of psychological instruments given our detailed report of the GMVS adaptation and testing processes according to the most recent international guidelines (ITC, 2018). Prior to adapting a Western-developed instrument for use with Middle Eastern populations, through a committee of Syrian mental health scholars and other experts, we assessed the applicability of the theoretical meaning-making model and its related constructs to the target population. The study used a sequential design, where Phase 1 FGs were aimed at preliminarily testing the GMVS-ArabV for the comprehensibility of test instructions, item content, and language, and informing data collection during Phase 2 individual interviews (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008). Despite the small number and size of the FGs, the Phase 1 results provided exploratory information on the scale application, and narratives on response processes were subsequently integrated into the overall dataset used to qualitatively explore the measure’s content.

GMVS-ArabV validity evidence based on internal structure was assessed in Phase 2. The results are preliminary and should be interpreted with caution due to the size and specificities of the sample. The scale showed acceptable distributional properties with no extreme bias in participants’ responses, which researchers should control for when using

ordinal scales with Arab populations (Baron-Epel et al., 2010). The lack of bias may be explained by the sample's relative youth and high level of formal education (Baron-Epel et al., 2010) as well as the method of administration. In some cases, participants revisited initial extreme responses (e.g., "nothing is fair"), either spontaneously or following probing by the researcher to clarify whether the participant was quantifying the strength or violation of belief or goal, thus suggesting layered and evolving cognitive structures. Because most respondents were student-refugees whose career and educational paths were interrupted or severely disrupted by the war, it was not surprising that strongest interitem correlations were found between violations of career aspirations and of goals related to self-acceptance, education, and social support, respectively, as well as between violations of goals related to self-acceptance and community and social support. The high association between the latter two items was expected given the importance of the collective to Syrian identity (Smeekes et al., 2017) and the negative impact of the war on community ties (Matos et al., 2021). The highest belief violations were found for Items 2 and 4, which assessed issues of control by "other forces" and perceived internal control (i.e. self in control). Given the uncertainty and losses associated with the refugee experience, this finding was not surprising and suggests that the cognitive structures related to life's predictability and controllability may require significant repairs to reduce distress. The fact that the belief that God is in control (Item 3) showed the lowest violations is consistent with the literature on religious meaning-making and the ability of religious beliefs to remain stable and, if sufficiently flexible, withstand extreme trauma (Park, 2005; Tuval-Mashiach & Dekel, 2014). Considering the centrality of religion to Syrian individual and community identity (Hassan et al., 2016), future studies should investigate the content of religious meaning structures and violations of experienced spirituality to better capture meaning-making processes in these communities. Due to the study's small sample size, we were not able to test the factor structure of the GMVS-ArabV, which future studies should explore with larger independent samples of the same population.

The second major strength of this study was its use of qualitative data to access processes of self-reflection triggered by the GMVS-ArabV. Taking a mixed-methods approach to cross-cultural adaptation is an often-overlooked strategy, but it represents an important methodology when working with severely traumatized and repeatedly disempowered populations (De Silva et al., 2020). We derived five key findings from the

qualitative data. First, rather than a standalone self-administered instrument, our findings indicated that the GMVS-ArabV should be used as part of a set of tools available to researchers and clinicians to explore meaning violations through a structured interview. Participants often exhibited an inability to promptly access violations and instead rated present appraisals, which then required a guided, step-by-step exercise to reflect on prewar appraisals and, subsequently, assess the extent of change. A revised version of the scale may need to include a three-part question for each item to assess the strength of pre- and posttrauma meanings followed by the extent of the discrepancy to ensure that respondents rate the intended construct. A second key finding pertains to the fact that different stressors can shatter different meaning structures, which may explain the overall low associations between individual items on the GMVS-ArabV. Previous evidence has suggested that meaning systems may be differentially impacted by the type of stressor experienced (Cheung Chung et al., 2018), and this idea should continue to be investigated, including through psychometrically sound instruments. Additionally, the need expressed by a small number of participants in our sample to clarify the direction (i.e., positive or negative) of changes in their own cognitions, (i.e., meanings made) suggests the need for better examination into how the process of reappraising these cognitions may promote or hinder psychological adjustment.

Third, much like extreme traumatic events, wartime and resettlement daily stressors also were shown to be capable of violating previously held beliefs and goals. This finding has two important implications for research and practice. Although postmigration stressors are almost exclusively considered sources of anxiety- and depression-related distress and premigration trauma is a source of PTSD (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010), the ability of the former to shatter cognitions and lead to trauma-like symptoms needs to be investigated. Secondly, predisplacement daily stressors have been insufficiently documented as potential sources of long-term distress in refugee populations (Miller & Rasmussen, 2017), with preference given to screening for and focusing on brutal predisplacement PTEs. Wartime stressors should also be integrated into clinical practice as potential sources of meaning violations, and clinicians should be prepared to accommodate these narratives and guide adaptive reappraisals.

Fourth, as survivors of the refugee experience are subjected to compounded PTEs throughout lengthy migration journeys, it is possible that a prewar/postwar framework for meaning violations, although conceptually appropriate, may be insufficient to capture the

complexity of violations and reappraisal trajectories. The fact that some respondents were able to reflect on meaning reappraisal journeys since the onset of the war in Syria and others narrated still-evolving beliefs indicates that meaning-making is a process as much as an outcome (Steger & Park, 2012), and refugees make meaning throughout their journey to safety (Matos et al., 2018).

Our last key finding pertains to the survival aspect of the refugee experience. As individuals accustomed to prioritizing needs to survive (Silove, 2013), it was not surprising that some participants articulated layered sets of beliefs and goals. While these individuals navigate stressors related to resettlement and concerns over the ongoing conflict back home with significant family and community suffering (Matos et al., 2022), they may not feel able or ready to engage in trauma-focused treatment or in the type of cognitive processing required to reflect on meaning violations, instead focusing on other basic, more tangible needs. The distress that such an exercise may trigger requires researchers and clinicians to respect soft refusals, recognize the protective function of silence, and empower refugees to be in control of their own narratives (De Haene et al., 2010).

There are several challenges to conducting research with severely traumatized, hard-to-reach populations, such as refugees, that limit the interpretation of the present findings. The Syrian community in Portugal is small, recently arrived, and reported research fatigue, which hindered recruitment efforts. The present sample was small and largely composed of student-refugees. Although this is a limitation derived from nonrandom sampling, it provided important insight into the experiences of a segment of the refugee population that is largely understudied. Both trauma exposure and meaning violations were self-reported, which may lead to recall bias, and because the study was cross-sectional and did not assess violations over time, it is possible that accounts were influenced by recent events rather than representing an accurate depiction of participant experiences. Although all study instruments were available in participants' native Arabic, oral communication during cognitive interviews was in English or Portuguese, which may have impacted respondents' ability to adequately explain cognitions. However, the fact that no interpreter was present during individual interviews eased participants' concerns about remaining anonymous in the community and may have allowed them to share deeply personal accounts with the researcher that may not have been disclosed otherwise. In our relatively young sample, participants' prewar worldviews pertained to pre-2011

functioning, 8 years before the interview, as they entered their teenage years or early adulthood, which sometimes made it difficult to discern whether changes in core beliefs and goals were due to the war or part of normal development into adulthood.

This study provides evidence supporting the content validity of the GMVS-ArabV, with adjustments required to accommodate refugees' complex paths to trauma recovery, as well as the need for larger, longitudinal studies to adequately assess construct and predictive validity for distress and psychological adjustment. Although the GMVS-ArabV does not provide answers to all questions regarding the nature of meaning violations in survivors of refugee trauma, it does offer a culturally appropriate tool that could be useful for clinicians to gather information at intake; adapt interventions to specific client needs; assess treatment progress through repeat measurements of cognitive-specific discrepancies; and, eventually, guide meaning-making efforts that lead to adaptive integration of past and present experiences. The fact that some participants were able to identify pre- and postdisplacement daily stressors as potential sources of meaning violations further advances the field's understanding of sources of psychological distress and should inform refugees' trauma recovery and healing in resettlement. Host countries should invest in promoting trauma-informed psychosocial interventions that are informed by the need to restore meaning systems, including finding new purpose(s) in life, as a condition for successful psychological adjustment and adaptive long-term integration.

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6

Intrapersonal meaning-making: Syrian Muslims' postwar religious meaning-making trajectories

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"IT'S THE GOD FACTOR": A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF SYRIAN MUSLIMS' POSTWAR RELIGIOUS MEANING-MAKING

"إنه العامل الالهي": دراسة نوعية في صنع المعنى الديني للمسلمين السوريين في فترة ما بعد الحرب

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Abstract

Objective: Religious meaning-making may facilitate psychological adjustment to even the most extreme traumatic stressors, including war and forced displacement. Yet few studies have examined the religious meaning-making trajectories of refugees and none from an Islamic perspective. Method: Given the centrality of Islam to Syrians' identity, this qualitative cross-sectional study investigated Syrian Muslims' post-war meaning-making, using Park's (2010) meaning-making model. Results: Thirty-three Syrian Muslim refugees living in Portugal, most of whom higher education student-refugees, were interviewed eight years after the onset of the war. Thematic analysis was used to explore cognitive reappraisal processes informed by religion. Key results suggest the recurrent nature of meaning-making throughout refugees' displacement trajectories, the centrality of religious coping and deliberate searches for meaning to resolve perceived discrepancies with pre-war global meaning, and the ability of Islam to withstand extreme challenges and provide a last-resort narrative, even for those Syrians with severely eroded beliefs. Conclusion: Resettlement in a secular Western country significantly affected refugees' religious meaning-making journeys. Although, for most, Islam remained a source of stability and continuity with pre-war lives, negative, unstable, and potentially-distressing meanings-made of trauma suggest incomplete meaning-making processes. Findings highlight the need for practitioners in host countries to incorporate faith and religious traditions in the provision of care.

Keywords: psychology of religion; Syrian refugees; religious coping; spirituality; psychology of Islam; psychological adjustment.

الملخص

الهدف: قد يسهّل صنع المعنى الديني التكيف النفسي حتى مع الضغوطات الأكثر خطورة، بما في ذلك الحرب والهجرة القسرية. ومع ذلك، عدد قليل من الدراسات قامت باختبار مسارات صنع المعنى الديني للاجئين دون تناول أي منها من منظور إسلامي. المنهج: نظراً لمركزية الإسلام في هوية السوريين، فقد بحثت هذه الدراسة المقطعية النوعية في صنع المعنى للمسلمين السوريين بعد الحرب، باستخدام نموذج بارك (2010) لصنع المعنى. النتائج: تمت مقابلة 33 لاجئاً سورياً مسلماً يعيشون في البرتغال، معظمهم من طلاب التعليم العالي، بعد ثماني سنوات من اندلاع الحرب. تم استخدام التحليل المواضيعي لاستكشاف عمليات إعادة التقييم المعرفي المستنيرة بالدين. تشير النتائج الرئيسية إلى الطبيعة المتكررة لصنع المعنى خلال مسارات نزوح اللاجئين، ومركزية التكيف الديني والبحث المتعمد عن معنى لحل التناقضات المتصورة مع المعنى العالمي قبل الحرب، وقدرة الإسلام على تحمل التحديات الشديدة وتقديم رواية الملاذ الأخير، حتى لأولئك السوريين ذوي المعتقدات المتآكلة بشدة. الخلاصة: أثرت إعادة التوطين في بلد غربي علماني بشكل كبير على رحلات صنع المعنى الدينية للاجئين. على الرغم من أن الإسلام ظل، بالنسبة لمعظم الناس، مصدراً للاستقرار والاستمرارية في حياة ما قبل الحرب، إلا أن المعاني السلبية وغير المستقرة، والمحتمل أن تكون مؤلمة الناتجة عن الصدمة تشير إلى عمليات غير مكتملة لصنع المعنى. تسلط النتائج الضوء على حاجة الممارسين في البلدان المضيفة إلى دمج العقيدة والتقاليد الدينية في تقديم الرعاية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: علم نفس الديني؛ اللاجئون السوريون؛ التأقلم الديني؛ الروحانية؛ سيكولوجية الإسلام؛ التكيف النفسي.

Introduction

Since 2011, the Syrian war has caused the mass displacement of millions of civilians fleeing a conflict fueled along religious and ethnic lines (Hassan et al., 2015). Combat, torture, enforced disappearances, death of loved ones, daily uncertainties and losses, and repeated forced internal and international displacements, have persistently challenged Syrians' assumptions of safety, justice, controllability, and predictability, and caused significant suffering (Kakaje et al., 2021; Matos et al., 2022). In Syria, a majority-Muslim country, Islam informs collective identity and provides the core meaning structure through which individuals interpret their experiences and express suffering (Hassan et al., 2015). Islamic beliefs, values, and practices are therefore expected to anchor Syrians' post-war meaning-making experiences.

As a meaning system, religion offers a comprehensive framework that provides answers to life's innermost questions while offering the possibility of transcendence (Bhatia, 2012; Hall & Hill, 2019). Religion can also play a central role in trauma recovery by offering solace in the midst of suffering and providing pathways to benevolently reframe life's extreme events (Park, 2005). To date, research on religious meaning-making (i.e., posttraumatic cognitive restructuring processes informed by a religious meaning system) has largely focused on Christian samples and survivors of one-time, individual traumatic events (Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2011), or been narrowly explored as religious coping (i.e., religion-informed cognitive and behavioral strategies that facilitate or impede psychological adjustment; Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2015). Given the extreme nature of refugee trauma and the centrality of religion to Syrian identity, understanding how Islamic beliefs contribute to the meaning-making processes of Syrian Muslim refugees is important.

From a worldview perspective, large monotheistic religions like Islam or Christianity offer a consistent model of the how world is or ought to be and provide a set of rules and behaviors that structure the everyday practices of societies (Bhatia, 2012; Krok et al., 2020; Lakitsch, 2018). Religious individuals are expected to make use of self-regulation skills to control their own behavior, thoughts, and feelings in a manner that is consistent with religious teachings (Vishkin et al., 2016) and can derive support from the divine in times of distress. Under conditions of hardship that challenge core assumptions, the faithful often manifest religious and spiritual struggles, which they can appease through a formal set of rituals, through personal practices of what they hold sacred (i.e.,

spirituality), or through support from their religious community (Hall & Hill, 2019; Lakitsch, 2018).

When faced with events that defy one's sense of control, predictability or comprehensibility, such as an untimely death, a life-altering diagnosis, or in the case of refugees, severe and compounded human rights violations, individuals may appraise those stressors (i.e., situational meaning) as discrepant from previous world assumptions (i.e., global meaning, comprised of beliefs, goals, and sense of purpose), thus requiring cognitive reframing efforts – of the stressor or of the shattered assumptions – to reduce suffering (Park, 2010). Park's (2010) integrated meaning-making model proposes that when global meaning structures are perceived to have been violated, individuals initiate automatic or intentional meaning-making efforts aimed at finding comprehensibility and significance in their experiences (i.e., search for meaning). Outputs of this process (i.e., meanings-made) may include revising initial situational appraisals or rebuilding shattered cognitive structures that contribute to perceived changes in psychological functioning.

Most research on meaning-making has focused on specific components of the process, namely coping, on how meaning-making contributes to outcomes related to psychological adjustment, such as perceived posttraumatic growth, and on meaning-making as an endpoint (Cheng et al., 2014; de Castella & Simmonds, 2013; Toussaint et al., 2017). However, previous research has suggested that: the meaning-making experiences of survivors of the refugee experience, who are exposed to new PTEs during and post-flight, might not have a clear end, meanings-made are subject to repeat cognitive reappraisals, and positive and negative reappraisals appear to co-exist and contribute differently to psychological adjustment (Frounfelker et al., 2020; Kelmendi et al., 2020; Matos et al., 2021).

Most individuals and communities with refugee life experience, including resettled refugees, asylum-seekers and other forcibly displaced migrants, originate from non-Western countries with strong collective traditions (Shakespeare-Finch et al., 2014). When they reach safe third countries in the West, refugees have to negotiate their postdisplacement identities in secular societies that emphasize the well-being of the individual over the common good, and where meaning-making is predominantly articulated through reason to the detriment of the divine and sacred (Bahtia, 2012). This context may hinder successful psychological adjustment of individuals whose identity derives greatly from both faith tradition and the collective, as religion can provide a

source of group cohesion (Lakitsch, 2018), enable group members to interpret shared experiences (Tuval-Mashiach & Dekel, 2014), and is expected to serve as the core meaning system within which the faithful frame their losses, seek benevolent interpretations of trauma, and derive coping resources (Park, 2005).

Posttraumatic psychological adjustment may be particularly challenging for Muslim refugees living in secular Western countries of Christian tradition, who may be deprived of their full religious and spiritual coping resources (Bhatia, 2012). The emerging body of empirical research on the psychology of Islam has underscored the importance of Islamic beliefs and practices as significant determinants of mental health in Muslim populations (Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2011). Like other major religious, such as Christianity, Judaism, and Hinduism, Islam is multidimensional and central to the lives of Muslims, who may adhere to some but not all of its elements; it includes a set of beliefs (e.g., belief in Allah as the one and true God, in the day of judgment, or in divine predestination), practices (e.g., prayer, testimony of faith, pilgrimage, or fasting) and ethical guidelines that determine the conduct of Muslims (e.g., generosity or humility), which may impact the physical and psychological wellbeing of Muslims (Abu-Raiya, 2012).

Understanding, recognizing, and incorporating refugees' religious and spiritual faith traditions and resources into the provision of care is not only ethical (Bryant-Davis & Wong, 2013) but should help facilitate adaptive meaning-making, especially given the ability of religious beliefs to remain stable in the face of extreme collective trauma (Hasan et al., 2018; Tuval-Mashiach & Dekel, 2014), and therefore offer survivors the prospect of previously-lost continuity. It is thus crucial to understand the role of Islamic faith in the cognitive processing of Muslim refugees' war and forced displacement stressors.

The Current Study

Guided by Park (2010)'s integrated meaning-making model, this qualitative study examined Islam's role in Syrian Muslims' post-displacement meaning-making processes, eight years after the start of the war. This study corresponds to Phase 2 (January – May 2019) of a larger two-phase mixed-methods research project to investigate psychological adjustment processes in Syrian refugees living in Portugal. Although not a traditional refugee destination country, arrivals of Syrian refugees and asylum-seekers to Portugal rose significantly between 2015 and 2017, largely through resettlement, relocation, and

higher education programs for refugees (Observatório das Migrações, 2021). Arriving individuals and families were placed across the national territory, mostly in urban communities, in a country where only an estimated 0.2% of the population is Muslim (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2012), and given initial assistance to begin rebuilding their lives. Given that the meaning-making model was Western-developed, its conceptual applicability to a non-Western Islamic context and the study protocol were tested during Phase 1 of the study (September – November 2018). In Phase 2, we used qualitative methodology to investigate the content of Syrian Muslims' lived experiences and worldviews, and subsequently inform the psychology of religion literature as well as posttraumatic growth-promoting practices with Muslim refugees. In our study, we expected pre-war Islamic cognitive structures to remain resilient despite exposure to extreme trauma and for refugees to engage in meaning-making processes throughout their flight trajectories.

Method

Participants

Inclusion criteria included: Syrian adults (i.e., 18yo or older), living in Portugal for a minimum of six months, with English or Portuguese fluency in addition to their native Arabic. Forty individuals participated in the study. One man dropped out after becoming distressed during the interview. Two Druze and four Christian individuals were excluded from the final sample due to their non-Islamic religious affiliation. The final sample included 33 participants: 16 men (48.5%) and 17 women (51.5%), with ages ranging from 19 to 36 (M = 27.3; SD = 4.6). Twenty-five individuals (75.7%) were beneficiaries of higher education programs for refugees (i.e., student-refugees), 5 were relocated refugees (15.2%) and 3 were (9.1%) spontaneous asylum-seekers. Participants' mean length of stay in Portugal was 28.0 months (SD = 20.3). The vast majority were single (n = 28; 84.8%) and five (15.2%) were married. All participants had completed at least high school education, one held a PhD (3.0%), 10 master's (30.3%) and 15 bachelor's (45.5%) degrees. Family-inherited religious background was: Sunni (n = 18, 54.5%), Alawite (n = 6, 18.2%), and Ismaili (n = 2, 6.1%); seven participants did not specify their branch of Islam (21.2%) and, where pertinent, are designated as "Other.". Two participants (6.1%) were unsure about their faith and three identified as atheists (9.1%). In resettlement, a majority (n = 19; 57.6%) did not regularly practice structured religious rituals.

Materials

The research protocol included: (1) a sociodemographic questionnaire designed to collect common determinants of refugee mental health, such as gender, education, or legal status, as well as religion-specific questions pertaining to religious background, belief, and practice: and (2) a semi-structured interview script informed by the integrated meaning-making model designed to guide participants through post-war cognitive reappraisals of shattered global beliefs, goals, and sense of purpose. To invoke reflections on belief systems, participants were first offered a common background to help ground them – "all of us have beliefs and thoughts about how we see ourselves in the world or who might be in control of our lives – am I in control? Is God in control? Is someone or something else in control? –, or, for example, whether the world is fair and safe." This was followed by two questions with probes to invoke pre- and postwar global beliefs and any perceived discrepancies: "When you think back on your life before the war, can you describe your beliefs or views of the world? What was your relationship with God then?"; and "What about now? Do you feel that those beliefs and relationship changed? Can you explain how they changed?"

Procedures

Data was collected by the Lisbon-based first author, who is trained and experienced in interviewing survivors of refugee trauma. Syrian nationals were recruited across continental Portugal using a combination of convenience and snowball sampling. Outreach strategies included dissemination of Arabic language materials through key stakeholders, including resettlement agencies and community leaders, and postings on social media. Study materials were developed in English for the purposes of the study, forward-translated to Arabic by a Syrian professional translator, and pre-tested in interpreter-assisted Focus Groups (FG) to assess language-, culture-, and trauma-informed issues. Because FG participants expressed concerns related to the presence of an interpreter and associated ability to remain anonymous in the community, Phase 2 interviews were conducted without language interpretation, in English or Portuguese, based on participant preference and fluency. Print Arabic versions of the materials were available to participants to ensure consistency of language. Interviews were conducted in the northern districts of Braga and Oporto (n = 14), in Aveiro and Coimbra (n = 8) and the capital Lisbon (n = 10) in central Portugal, and the southern district of Évora (n = 1). Researcher and participants met in quiet places convenient to participants and interviews

lasted 90 minutes on average. The purpose of the study, voluntary nature of participation, and assurance of confidentiality and anonymity were reviewed, and participants were given an opportunity to ask questions prior to signing consent forms. Due to the potential for retraumatization associated with revisiting past traumatic events, participants were informed on the nature of stress reactions and, when appropriate, participants were offered the possibility of referral to pro-bono psychosocial services. All interviews were audio recorded. At the end of the interview, participants received a €10 gift card. The study received ethics approval by ISPA – Instituto Universitário Ethics Committee (Ref. D/004/09/2018) in September 2018.

Data analysis

Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed, participants' names were replaced and coded, and a top-down, theoretically-driven approach to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to explore post-war cognitive reappraisal trajectories, following the structure of the meaning-making model. The data analysis team included refugee trauma and psychological adjustment researchers and two research assistants (RAs), all of whom were trained in thematic analysis. The first author did a first in-depth reading of all transcripts, generated initial codes, and created a preliminary set of themes informed by the main elements of the meaning-making model, which were subsequently reviewed and discussed with the co-authors. RAs then analyzed the dataset using those themes and met regularly with the first author to examine disparities and find consensus. Given the scope of the study, all transcripts went through a second round of analysis to identify religion-informed meaning-making processes; when needed, new themes were created or revised to ensure that the analysis faithfully represented the meaning of participants' experiences and further informed the theoretical model. During both phases of analysis, team members met regularly to review findings, discuss narratives that deviated from themes, and develop the final thematic map. All data were managed and analyzed using MAXQDA 20 software (VERBI Software, 2019).

Results

We identified 11 themes that are structured along five components of participants' religious meaning-making processes: pre-war religious global beliefs; situational appraisals of the war and refugee experience stressors; search for meaning; religious coping; and meanings-made. Themes and subthemes are discussed in detail below and the

Thematic Map, with suggested religious meaning-making pathways, is presented in Figure 2 at the end of this section.

Pre-war Religious Global Beliefs

Theme 1: Inherited Muslim Identity

In pre-war Syria, most participants were adolescent or young adults and described their religious identity as being inherited from family and shared by the community. Muslim Syrians received religious education and led lives where rituals like prayer, going to the mosque, and expectations of conduct structured all aspects of their lives. This theme encompassed two subthemes: “family and community expectations” and “universal values.”

Family and Community Expectations. In their youth, participants recalled being reminded by their parents of the need to comply with certain rituals like prayer, or, for the young women, with external manifestations of faith like wearing the hijab that conformed to the lives of the collective. Young men spoke of the mosque as a place of religious instruction, socialization, and worship. AO, a Sunni man of 24, described being sent to the mosque every summer as a child for religious school, which was where “families always sent their kids.” He explained, “you don’t play in the streets or in the park. You just go there and learn the Quran.” BS, 27-year-old, also Sunni, recalled the mosque as a place to “get all the people together, to meet, to talk with each other,” and contextualized its dual function in the lives of Syrians: “People are not going [to the mosque] because of religion. It’s more related to the culture. So, I go there basically because of the prayer, but actually I’m going there to meet my friends and go out afterwards.” This entangled relationship between culture and religion was also expressed through all-encompassing statements pertaining to rituals or conduct that were collectively shared, sometimes regardless of the one’s religiosity (e.g., “In my family – I don’t know if we are really a religious family – but we pray and everything like all Syrians).

Because religious identity was inherited, several participants recounted sometimes struggling to reconcile external demonstrations of devotion with a faith they did not experience and the associated pressure from family and community. This incongruence led some, like MS (Other, 32), to express frustration at being reminded by his mother to “not miss a prayer,” and others, like GH (Sunni, 23), to conform to cultural norms (e.g., wearing the hijab) regardless of her faith: “people all the time were asking [my mother], ‘when will you make her wear the scarf?’” GH explained that, despite the mounting

pressure, her mother wanted the decision "to come from my heart. 'Because it is faith, you know?'"

Universal Values. Beliefs in a merciful and almighty God, in divine predestination, the power of prayer, earthly suffering, afterlife, and in trials as a sign of God's love were all articulated by participants. "I believe in *the* God," [emphasis added] stated RA (Sunni, 36) before narrating the unwavering promise of continuity offered by her beliefs, "…and I think life is [composed of]: the world that came before, the world now, and what will happen in the future. All these difficulties are exams to test our patience here on Earth, to make us stronger." Thirty-year-old KK, also Sunni, explained how the overarching belief in the afterlife impacted, and ultimately constrained, Muslims' daily lives: "[even] in our vocabulary, we don't care about life. We care about afterlife. And this impacts every decision of your life." Another Sunni young woman, 23-year-old LJ, in one run-on paragraph, testified to the main tenets of Islam. These tenets included: the power of prayer, "When I was in Syria, I was always praying for a better life (…)"; the belief that being a good Muslim made her deserving of good things, "So I always believe that God will give me what I ask because I am a good person, I don't hurt anyone. (…)"; the comfort and hope provided by faith, "And this faith gives me the hope for tomorrow. I know that if I am doing good, like, if I am studying hard, I will achieve something in the future. (…)"; and the temporary nature of suffering, "So there is still hope in every dark moment. If I believe this, I know that I can survive for tomorrow. Being in a bad situation doesn't mean that it will be bad forever."

Appraisals of the War and Refugee Experience Stressors

Religious meaning systems were repeatedly and cumulatively challenged during the war, flight journeys to Europe, and resettlement. We identified two themes of situational appraisals: "benevolent situational appraisals" and "shattered religious beliefs."

Theme 2: Benevolent Situational Appraisals

This theme was present in only a small number of accounts, but it was significant given those individuals' ability to appraise extreme stressors as non-discrepant and to integrate them into pre-war religious cognitive structures. Participants who derived benevolent appraisals appeared to anchor them in three protective factors: an expectation of war (e.g., "when we were kids, we were raised to know that we were living near the enemy, which is Israel, so we always knew that there was going to be a war. Now, later,

it's going to happen;" SS, woman, Sunni, 28); the belief that war and forced displacement were a test from God "to see if we can keep our faith," HH, man, Sunni, 36); and the promise of continuity of history and universe beyond their time on Earth, where war was downplayed as part of life (e.g., "all countries have had war inside. Not only [Syria]. So we should overcome these problems and live a new life; RA, woman, Sunni, 36).

Theme 3. Shattered Religious Beliefs

"You don't realize this, but [with the war] people started to lose their faith," described KK (woman, Sunni, 30). As the conflict unfolded, most participants began to perceive distressing discrepancies with beliefs in a benevolent, all-powerful God. Individuals articulated their narratives in the conditional as they tried to make sense of the events around them. Formulations such as, *if God* "loves people" or "exits" or "is watching what is happening in Syria" prefaced interrogatives that suggested irreconcilable discrepancies: *then* "…*why* is He letting everybody die?" AO (man, Sunni, 23); "…*what* is He doing? *What* is His plan?" AK (man, Sunni, 24); "…*where*'s God? If there is a God, He would not allow this to happen," KK (woman, Sunni, 30); or "… *why* doesn't God do anything to help Syria? People in Syria go to the mosque, they pray, but nothing changes!" NM (man, Sunni, 27). Interrogatives such as why, what, or where, expressed hurt, confusion, and abandonment, as well as negative appraisals of an all-powerful God who remained passive in the face insurmountable suffering.

In addition to war trauma, extreme daily hardships, and compounded losses pre-, during, and post-flight led individuals and the community to reexamine religious beliefs, values, and ethical conduct. AO (Sunni, 23) recounted the impact his flight to Portugal, through Turkey, Mediterranean crossing, and Greece, had on his and other Muslim refugees' beliefs. Stranded in Greece without food or shelter, AO retold of their decision to eat ham sandwiches, the only available food, despite it being a sin. The extreme suffering he had undergone thus far on his flight journey caused him to perceive significant discrepancies with pre-war expectations of safety and justice that led him to progressively lose his faith. He narrated his cognitive processing as follows:

> I was like 'Okay, God didn't allow pork meat, it was forbidden and he wants us to be thankful and blah, blah… Don't lie, don't steal, don't do this, don't do that…Okay but we don't have anything and there is only this pork. What should we do? Okay, I don't care.' It was just like that, step-by-step, I started to lose my faith.

Search for Meaning

The inability to make sense of extreme suffering triggered distressing searches for meaning, both automatic (i.e., "theme 4: reaching out to God") and deliberate (i.e., "theme 5: deliberate search for religiosity"), born out of despair, frustration, and anger towards God.

Theme 4: Reaching out to God

Automatic meaning searches appeared to be triggered at particularly trying times, during which participants questioned and pleaded with God, sought comprehension, and negotiated salvation. AI (Sunni, 25) recalled reaching out to God in anger and frustration at a time when he and other refugees attempted to reach Europe: "How did you let us get to this low point? We also have a right to live! We have a right to be home with our families!" Facing death in the middle of the sea, a young man, who due to being gay – a sin – perceived himself as someone underserving of mercy, retold how he attempted to negotiate salvation for the children in the boat with him: "God, I'm a very bad person, so you don't need to save me, just save these people. These kids didn't do anything to die in this place."

Theme 5. Deliberate Search for Religiosity

Most participants, however, retold engaging in deliberate attempts to comprehend and find meaning in their experiences. In one run-on paragraph AG (Sunni, 36) summarized the process that led him to attempt to resolve the discrepancies triggered by the war and his family's forced displacement: "I am Muslim, so I believe in one God," [pre-trauma cognitive structure]; "… So, what was happening to us raised a lot of questions. Why us? Why me? Why my family? I had a lot of problems and some people are just enjoying their lives. It's kind of unfair," [upward comparisons and perceived unfairness triggered the need to make sense of the events]; "… And when you reach this point, you need to find the way to find another path in life," [the discrepancies triggered an intentional search for a new cognitive structure that could explain and integrate stressors]. Much like AG, other young men and women engaged in deliberate searches for meaning. We identified two subthemes: "repeated intentional searches" and "inability to openly examine beliefs."

Religious Beliefs prone to Repeated Intentional Searches. The journey to find and make sense of their faith, beliefs, and even identity as Muslims was initiated at different points in Syrians' lives and often prone to being revisited. Because religion was

inherited, several participants discussed having gone through different periods in their lives when they questioned their faith and Muslim identity. Thirty-year-old AK (Sunni) explained that growing up she "spent some years just searching if [God] exists or not." Having concluded that God did exist, during the war, AK's struggle was subsequently related to the inability to reconcile her faith with the role religious leaders were playing in the war and in whom she had "lost trust." In resettlement, AK's religious beliefs were yet again shaken after facing significant hardships. She felt betrayed by God – "I trusted You, but You disappointed me." – and the cumulative discrepancies AK perceived after years of war and displacement caused great suffering and decreased faith: "The feelings were very complex because I started to really have emotional pain. And that made me question [God]. (...) Now I feel that I am no longer able to pray."

Inability to Openly Examine Beliefs. In spite of the war, Islam's major tenets were not amenable to being publicly discussed. NK (Alawite, 25) recounted that, if she attempted to question God's existence, her religious teacher would tackle the subject with a simple solution: "if you start thinking about whether God exists or not, you just have to stop thinking and say that God exists." This inability to discuss Islam was frustrating to NK and contradicted the Quran itself, the first word of which is "read." She explained: "like 'think, read, answer. Just ask and seek answers to your questions.'" AK (Sunni, 24) shared in the frustration and described his religious "journey" as being focused on openly discussing the dogma, on "destroying the taboo, talking about it, and, at the end of the day, refuse it." In the case of 27-year-old NM (Sunni), although his search was essentially intrapsychic, he also recognized the taboo and praised himself for having the courage to examine his beliefs. "It was a big question of me asking where is God," he stated. "I really wanted to know if I am Muslim. I believed in Him but I had never questioned myself regarding Him."

Religious Coping

Coping strategies informed by religious beliefs were central to Syrians' ability to cognitively and emotionally process trauma. We discerned two themes of coping strategies: "active coping" and "avoidant coping."

Theme 6: Active Coping

This theme was largely composed of emotion-focused strategies and included two subthemes: "prayer in times of distress" and "self-talk."

Prayer in Times of Distress. The most common religious coping resource was prayer through which participants sought comfort (e.g., "when I feel worry or fear, I go to [God]. I just start speaking with Him in the prayer." LJ, woman, Sunni, 23) and protection (e.g., "all the time I was asking God, 'please protect me, please protect my family. My family needs to be safe,'" NN, woman, Alawite, 27). Even those men and women with shattered beliefs admitted to seeking God in times of total despair. Faced with the possibility of dying at sea, AO (man, Sunni, 23) recounted:

> Okay, at this point there's nobody: I cannot help [the other refugees] and they cannot help me, you know? So there's only God. In the middle of the sea, only God can help us. So I looked at the sky – I was crying, it was raining – and I asked God to save us.

Self-talk. Self-talk was also a very common soothing strategy. Some people engaged in downward comparisons with others whose suffering they perceived to be greater than theirs. The war robbed HH (Sunni, 36) of his dreams "to build [his] own house, get married, make a family, improve [his] position at work." Although the perceived violation of his life goals caused him to "feel depressed," when HH thought of other Syrians whose life circumstances were vastly worst, he felt lucky: "at that time I told myself, 'at least I am safe. I am healthy. I am not affected physically.' So, thank God at least, you know?" Self-talk also served to remind the faithful that God was an ever-present source of hope and protection (e.g., "when I feel full of stuff, then I say, 'no, God is with me. I can do everything. Nothing is impossible,'" LJ, woman, Sunni, 23).

Theme 7: Avoidant Coping

A few participants who were still struggling to resolve shaken religious beliefs confided to avoiding conversations or thoughts about religion. They felt anxious and overwhelmed by the challenges of their postdisplacement lives, which they prioritized over attempting to resolve higher order beliefs. MS, a 32-year-old post-graduate student, preferred to focus on his immediate daily responsibilities while leaving any attempts to settle life's existential questions to a later time:

> Life is already hard as it is, not to mention for somebody who came from a war zone and all the *psychological travels* that you have that culminated in this period. And you have to compete in the new country and do quite a lot of stuff… So many challenges and you have to put more stress on yourself? (…) It's futile to think about it right now, because even the greatest minds cannot agree on His existence or not.

The "psychological travels" described above alluded to the recurrent nature of refugee trauma, meaning violations and appraisals that cumulatively contribute to the depletion of refugees' cognitive resources. At present time, establishing a hierarchy of needs and delaying a new meaning-making journey appeared to be adaptive for MS.

Meanings-made

Resettlement in a secular and safe Western country marked an important turning point in participants' religious meaning-making journeys by giving them the opportunity and freedom to examine their inherited beliefs against their lived experiences. Eight years after the start of the war, participants appeared to have reached four themes of religious meaning-making outputs: "unresolved beliefs," "changed religious practice," "decreased religiosity," and "stable beliefs."

Theme 8: Unresolved Religious Beliefs

The narratives of participants whose religious beliefs remained unresolved were filled with formulations in the conditional (e.g., "even if God exits," AO, man, Sunni, 32) that suggested still evolving and ambivalent beliefs (e.g., Yes [I believe]… Hmm, no… yes. Yes, I believe, but at the same time, I don't believe," AI, Man, Sunni, 25) that may have been temporarily adaptive because it did not require them to make a final, potentially distressing, determination. In our highly educated sample, these individuals appeared to be cognizant of the non-stagnant nature of their reappraisal journeys, including the potential for "one day find[ing] a clear answer" (NK, woman, Alawite, 25) or, for their beliefs to keep evolving to meet their life circumstances: "I'm trying day-by-day [to be a good person]" ME (Sunni, 32) rationalized, "now I have this belief, but I don't know if tomorrow it will change."

Theme 9: Changed Religious Practice

"As Arab people, everything in our lives is linked to religion. But [in Portugal] there are no restrictions, no religious rules in my life, and it's very easy to explore the world," (AO, man, Sunni, 32). Life in resettlement offered participants the freedom to practice according to their life circumstances and faith, which was experienced both as distressing as well as life-affirming. For example, the absence of an Islamic cultural context in a majority-Catholic country made it difficult for LJ (Sunni, 23) "to stay on the same path" and fulfill her obligations, including her prayers, whereas EA (Other, 21) described the practical challenges of fasting during Ramadan. For those who experience freedom as an opportunity, secularism allowed individuals not to put too much pressure

on themselves (e.g., "I wear scarf and everything but I don't follow all those rules," ME, Woman, Sunni, 30), to, despite some initial distress, take pride in the symbols of their Muslim identity (e.g., "I tell people, 'it's my choice to wear the scarf,'" GH, Woman, Sunni, 23), or, in some cases, to rid themselves of what they perceived to be symbols of oppression, such as the hijab:

> I still remember the first day outside without the hijab. It was amazing. I was just dancing. (…) The feeling of the air touching my hair was really worth it. (KK, Woman, Sunni, 30)

Theme 10: Decreased Religiosity

The repeat assaults on religious beliefs after years of war and forced displacement and the challenges and opportunities provided by resettlement appeared to weaken the beliefs of a significant number of participants. Decreased religiosity was expressed through three subthemes: "learned self-reliance," "the God factor," and "atheism."

Learned Self-Reliance. "I think maybe during the war something happened, the mentality of people changed. God still exists, but we cannot link everything to the God. Because some circumstances depend on us humans." (AO, man, Sunni, 32). The belief in an all-controlling, benevolent God, which had been shattered to different degrees throughout the war, required previous assumptions to be adjusted in order to integrate participants' lived experiences. Syrians had to learn to be self-reliant and to trust in the kindness of people they met along the way. "It's a different point of view," AG (man, Sunni, 36) explained, "now I believe in people more than I believe in God, because people helped us and God is just in heaven." This sentiment was echoed by 23-year-old AO (Sunni), who learned that it was a matter of luck "find[ing] the right person to help you. It's not about God. You control yourself, your life." This shift in the locus of control towards the self, allowed AO to make peace with God: "I don't hate Him. I just don't like Him as I used to. I'm just at peace."

"The God Factor." Numerous participants in our sample had, at different points in their journeys, attempted to reconcile science and religion. Things that transcended reason and could not be otherwise be explained by science were, for now and when no other explanation could be found, attributable to God. MS (man, Other, 32) pointed to all the "illogical stuff" that religion explained that defied comprehension, whereas AG (Sunni, 36) had decided at this point in his and his family's displacement journey to embrace the unknown as the "God factor," a risk he had to be willing to take when making life decisions:

> There's always a risk factor in any decision. So, this risk factor we can call it the 'God factor.' Because [God] just gives you the good and the bad and you choose the path. We don't know if the path is correct, but we should try.

Atheism. The most extreme loss of faith was atheism. This was a small but significant theme that helped at least four participants resolve insurmountable discrepancies: reaching the conclusion that God did not exist appeared to appease their suffering. AK (Sunni-atheist, 24) explained, "I used to believe in God. And when I believed in Him, I hated Him. But then I discovered that you actually don't have to believe." The atheists in the sample spoke proudly of their newly-found identity, despite suspicion, disappointment, and even rejection by family and community. For example, WK (Sunni-atheist, 25) stated that she avoided conversations about religion with her friends, who would remind her that "if you don't believe in God, you are going to hell." However, despite the pride they felt in their journeys, it remained hard for these young men and women to clearly articulate their new self (e.g. "I tell people I am Muslim, but atheist," WK, 25) and to negotiate the often distressing void created by the absence of such a core cognitive structure. When asked how the war had impacted his religious beliefs, aforecited AK, who had proclaimed to be "100% atheist" replied, "are we talking about me and the war? Not *the war in me*?" [emphasis added], thereby suggesting significant ongoing distress.

Theme 11: Stable Beliefs

> I was always thinking, 'why is God letting people die this way - under torture, in prison, bombings?' So because of this, I tried to understand why I am wearing the scarf at all. (…) So basically I think that maybe God wants us to see how human beings can be bad. And for those who are victims, I think that maybe God wants them to understand how strong they are, to be more patient. Because we have something in my religion that says that the more you are patient, the stronger you are, and the more you will receive from God. (GH, woman, Sunni, 23)

Theme 11 encompassed the experiences of a subset of participants, like GH, for whom Islam provided a set of sufficiently flexible beliefs to withstand repeated assaults on meaning. Eight years after the onset of the war, these individuals had been able to successfully integrate their experiences and build narratives that were congruent with pre-war beliefs, despite potential distressing violations along the way. Beliefs of justice, fairness, benevolence or continuity, to the extent that they derived from the central cognitive structure provided by the divine, therefore remained relatively stable. Narratives from this set of participants appeared to circle back to pre-war global beliefs of continuity

(e.g., “I think nothing changed. The world is the same. (…) The point is that you have different experiences.” AK, woman, Sunni, 31), of suffering as a test to one’s faith (e.g., “I believe that God has good things for people and that we face these difficulties in our lives as a test to our faith,” HH, man, Sunni, 36), of benevolence (e.g., “I keep going with my life. I don’t worry about the future, because everything with God is good,” RN, woman, Alawite, 19), and of the possibility of transcendence (e.g. “So, in my point of view, God is fair and the world is fair, because what we lose now, we will gain later, maybe after this life,” LJ, woman, Sunni, 23).

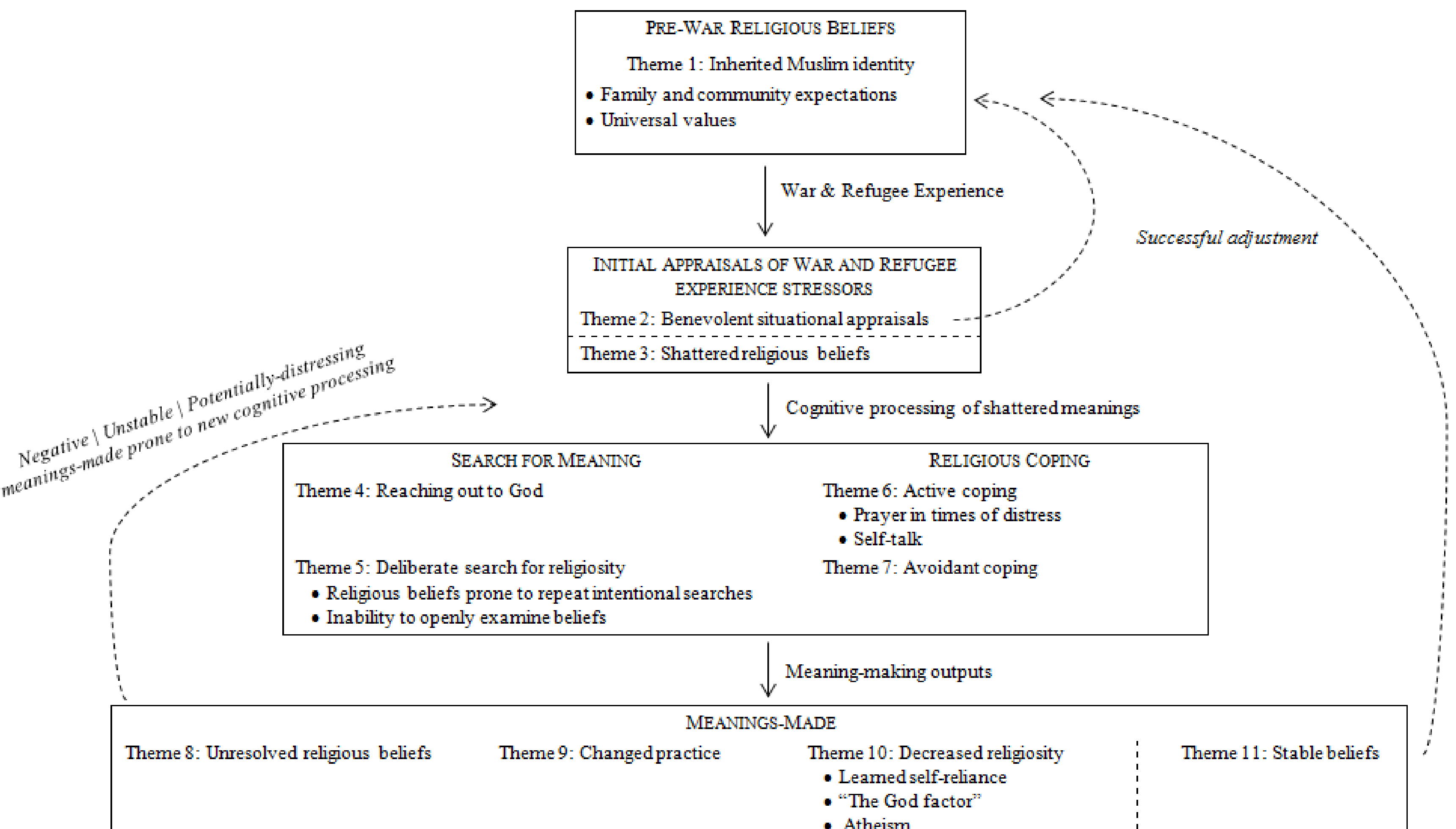

Figure 2. Thematic Map and Suggested Religious Meaning-Making Trajectories

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the content of Syrian Muslims' religious meaning-making experiences in the aftermath of the Syrian war and subsequent forced displacement. Data collection took place eight years after the onset of the war, in a sample of young, highly-educated, largely Sunni, war-exposed civilians living in urban communities across a secular southern European country of Catholic tradition. Our results suggest Islam's ability to withstand repeated extreme challenges and remain a foundational cognitive structure that, if needed, offers a last-resort narrative (i.e., "the God factor") that allowed most Syrian Muslims to explain and integrate events that defied human comprehension, sense of control, science, and reason. Despite using a pre-war/present time structure in our interviews, overwhelmingly, participants were able to provide rich accounts of meaning-making trajectories during different periods of their refugee life experiences that included new triggers, search for meaning, and cognitive reappraisals. This finding aligns with earlier theoretical propositions (Steger & Park, 2012) as well as more recent empirical studies with refugee populations (Frounfelker et al., 2020; Kelmendi et al., 2020; Matos et al., 2021) that meaning-making is both a trajectory and a dynamic process which, in survivors of complex, collective trauma, is subject to being revisited with time, context, and new stressors, and therefore may not have a clear end.

The qualitative methodology offered insight into Arab Muslim refugees' post-war cognitive processing and helps advance the literature on the psychology of religion, in particular, the psychology of Islam. Our sample was generally young and largely composed of university student-refugees who had to navigate extreme challenges to their inherited religious beliefs and identity. In their Middle Eastern context, Syrians had been taught to expect war, which may have been initially protective (Tuval-Mashiach & Dekel, 2014), as it offered a narrative that ultimately preserved core religious beliefs. However, as the war progressed, Syrians began to question beliefs in a benevolent, all-powerful God whom they perceived to remain passive in the face of such anguish. As refugees discerned shattering discrepancies, they attempted to find meaning in the suffering around them through interrogatives directed at God (*e.g.*, why, where, what, how), which confirms a core function of all major religions to provide pathways to interpret suffering in a less negative light through emotional regulation and cognitive reappraisals (Vishkin et al., 2016). For some, suffering was understood as a test from God, which should be

overcome with faith and hope and offered opportunities for spiritual growth, thus suggesting Islamic beliefs' extraordinary resilience and flexibility. These results are consistent with prior research on the role major religions play in posttraumatic meaning-making (Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2015; Hall & Hill, 2019). Because Muslims are expected to submit to suffering as a test of faith, openly questioning the existence of God or examining one's beliefs was socially unacceptable and a source of significant distress to those who dared break the taboo. Muslims who voice religious struggles have been found to experience stigma and loneliness (Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2011), which in the case of displaced Muslims may be especially distressing as it aggravates the disconnect from homeland, family, and larger social support networks.

With the exception of a few individuals whose initial and/or post-displacement appraisals of the war were non-discrepant and integrated into their preexisting beliefs, participants experienced varying degrees of decreased or altered religiosity or modified religious practice that align with other recent findings with Syrian refugees (Skalisky et al., 2020; Zbidat et al., 2020). This work also provides evidence of the multidimensional nature of Islam, which, like Christianity and Hinduism, can be experienced differently by different people (Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2015). In our sample, regardless of the meanings-made and how refugees experienced their faith, Islam remained an important source of stability, identity, and continuity with a pre-war life and self. This was true even for atheists who had trouble divorcing their newly-found identity from their inherited Muslim one (*e.g.*, "I'm Muslim, but atheist.") that used to structure all aspects of their lives, including their relationships with others in the community. The shattering of such a comprehensive cognitive structure left a significant existential, cultural, community, and identity void, which science helped fill (Hall & Hill, 2019), but that may be too distressing and unsustainable in the long-run, and thus require renewed cognitive processing until either more benevolent interpretations are reached or a similarly comprehensive global meaning system is found.

The war and refugee experience led some Syrians to seek more intimate and spiritual connections with God. These deliberate quests for spiritual growth and deeper levels of meaning have been found to lead to perceptions of posttraumatic growth in studies with Christian samples (de Castella & Simmonds, 2013). However, in our study, repeated engagement in intentional spiritual searches led to weakening as well as strengthening faith and beliefs, and would therefore be expected to contribute variably to

psychological adjustment (Matos et al., 2021; Toussaint et al., 2017). In our study, how learned self-reliance impacted those refugees' psychological adjustment was unclear; although the belief that God cannot be wholly responsible for life's events provided the faithful with an adaptive pathway that maintained overall preexisting beliefs, we cannot rule out that the learned need to be self-reliant may cause additional distress. Future studies should employ a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to capture how intentional searches for spiritual connection impact Muslim refugees' long-term psychological adjustment.

Lastly, and as expected, life experience in Portugal, a secular Western country, significantly impacted the religious meaning-making trajectories of Muslim refugees (Bhatia, 2012; Hasan et al., 2018). Resettlement provided significant contrasts with life in Syria and offered the freedom to practice according to the strength of one's faith. To different degrees, this freedom was generally perceived as distressing: if on the one hand, it made it hard for some to maintain the level of piety expected of the Muslim faithful, on the other hand, the opportunities for self-affirmation that others found in resettlement, namely hijab-wearing women, forced them to grapple with the meaning and impact of wearing – or removing – such an identity-affirming symbol of Islam in a country dominated by a Catholic majority. Although Portugal is generally a welcoming country with low perceived religious discrimination (European Commission, 2015), Islamic practices and rituals occupy a public space that raises suspicion towards Muslims within a wider anti-Muslim sentiment in the West (Bhatia, 2012) or that may be harder to accommodate or reconcile with traditional Portuguese practices (*e.g.*, Friday prayer during regular work hours). Future research should investigate how the attitudes of people from different faiths towards resettled Muslim refugees impact their reappraised religious meanings and religion-informed values, life goals and sense of purpose.

Limitations

This study used a convenience sample largely composed of an understudied segment of the refugee population, that is, beneficiaries of higher education programs for refugees, and therefore their experiences may not be representative of those of other Syrian refugees. In the study's young sample, meaning-making was assessed retrospectively, eight years after the onset of the war, and therefore the extent to which individuals' developmental stage and time since the events impacted trajectories and outputs is unknown. Additionally, the experiences of participants from different branches

of Islam may have differed in ways we were not able to explore. The fact that the interviews were not conducted in participants' native Arabic may have posed difficulties for participants to express more complex or nuanced processes, despite providing them with an important opportunity to speak anonymously about their processes, including potentially stigmatizing religious struggles. Lastly, this study focused on meaning-making informed by religious beliefs and hence does not represent the totality of participants' meaning-making experiences. Future studies should explore the cognitive reappraisal processes of shattered life goals and sense of purpose and how those contribute to psychological adjustment in resettlement.

Conclusion

Resettlement in a secular Western country may offer unique opportunities and significant challenges to religious meaning-making for refugees from Islamic societies. Although Islam was able to withstand major meaning violations and provide a source of continuity for most refugees, negative and unstable meanings-made of trauma suggest incomplete cognitive processing that may require guided reappraisals through psychological growth-promoting interventions that incorporate refugees' faith and religious traditions.

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7

Interpersonal meaning-making: Syrian refugees' community-informed meaning-making trajectories

This chapter is based on the paper

Matos, L., Costa, P. A., Park, C. L., Indart, M. J., & Leal, I. (2021). 'The war made me a better person': Syrian refugees' meaning-making trajectories in the aftermath of collective trauma. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 18(*16), 8481. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18168481

“THE WAR MADE ME A BETTER PERSON”: SYRIAN REFUGEES’ MEANING-MAKING TRAJECTORIES IN THE AFTERMATH OF COLLECTIVE VIOLENCE

"الحرب جعلتني شخصاً أفضل": مسارات صنع المعنى للاجئين السوريين في أعقاب الصدمات الجماعية

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Abstract

The centrality of the collective to Syrian identity and the ability of war to disrupt community ties have led to significant violations of Syrians' pre-war assumptions about themselves, the world, and their place in the world. Guided by the integrated meaning-making model, this qualitative cross-sectional study assessed Syrian refugees' meaning trajectories through their reappraisals of the war, attempts to repair community-informed shattered meanings, and those processes' outputs (i.e., meanings-made) and outcomes (i.e., perceived psychological adjustment). We conducted semi-structured cognitive interviews with 39 Syrian war-exposed adults living in urban communities across Portugal, most of whom were beneficiaries of higher education programs for refugees. Interviews were analyzed through thematic analysis. Results suggest that the war severely disrupted Syrians' sense of collective self, and that they repeatedly engaged in search for meaning, appraisals of the war, and reappraisals of shattered beliefs, life goals, and sense of purpose, both during wartime and in resettlement. In Portugal, despite persistent negative beliefs about the collective and ongoing and distressing searches for meaning, participants' lived experiences concomitantly informed positive meaning reappraisals, including progressive restoration of worldviews, new opportunities for self-realization, and newly-found purpose, leading to perceived psychological benefits and growth. These findings suggest that meaning-making is both a trajectory and a dynamic process, informed by place and sociopolitical context. Clinical work to facilitate adaptive meaning-making and psychosocial interventions that help restore refugees' shattered beliefs about safety, predictability, trust, and belonging, may be helpful directions to promote positive psychological adjustment and improved integration outcomes in refugees.

Keywords: collective violence; survivors of war and trauma; forced migration; posttraumatic growth; student refugees; world assumptions; core beliefs; cognitive processing; qualitative research.

الملخص

أدت مركزية المجموعة في الهوية السورية بالإضافة إلى قدرة الحرب على تعطيل الروابط المجتمعية إلى انتهاكات كبيرة لافتراضات السوريين قبل الحرب عن أنفسهم والعالم ومكانهم فيه. بالاستعانة بنموذج صنع المعنى المتكامل، قيمت هذه الدراسة النوعية المقطعية مسارات المعنى للاجئين السوريين من خلال إعادة تقييمهم للحرب، ومحاولات إصلاح المعاني المحطمة المستنيرة للمجتمع، بالإضافة إلى مخرجات تلك العمليات (أي المعاني المصنوعة) والنتائج (أي التكيف النفسي المدرك). أجرينا مقابلات إدراكية شبه منظمة مع ٣٩ من البالغين السوريين المعرضين للحرب والذين يعيشون في المجتمعات الحضرية في جميع أنحاء البرتغال، معظمهم من المستفيدين من برامج التعليم العالي للاجئين .تم تحليل المقابلات من خلال التحليل المواضيعي. تشير النتائج إلى أن الحرب عطلت بشكل شديد إحساس السوريين بالذات الجماعية، وأنهم انخرطوا مراراً وتكراراً في البحث عن المعنى، تقييمات الحرب، إعادة تقييم المعتقدات المحطمة، أهداف الحياة، والشعور بالهدف، سواء أثناء الحرب أو أثناء إعادة التوطين. في البرتغال، على الرغم من المعتقدات السلبية المستمرة حول عمليات البحث الجماعية، المستمرة، والمزعجة عن المعنى، فإن التجارب المعيشية للمشاركين تدل في ذات الوقت على إعادة تقييم المعنى الإيجابي، بما في ذلك الاستعادة التدريجية لوجهات النظر نحو العالم، الفرص الجديدة لتحقيق الذات، والهدف المتجدد، مما يؤدي إلى تصور فوائد النفسية وتطور. تشير هذه النتائج إلى أن صنع المعنى هو مسار وعملية ديناميكية، تتعلق بالمكان والسياق الاجتماعي السياسي. قد يكون العمل السريري بهدف تسهيل صنع المعنى التكيفي والتدخلات النفسية والاجتماعية التي تساعد على استعادة المعتقدات المحطمة للاجئين حول السلامة، الاستقراء، الثقة، والانتماء وسيلة مفيدة لتعزيز التكيف النفسي الإيجابي ونتائج الاندماج المحسنة في اللاجئين

الكلمات المفتاحية: العنف الجماعي؛ الناجين من الحرب والصدمات؛ الهجرة القسرية؛ نمو ما بعد الصدمة؛ الطلاب اللاجئون؛ افتراضات العالم؛ المعتقدات الأساسية؛ البحث النوعي في المعالجة الإدراكية.

Introduction

War and other forms of collective violence can threaten individual and community assumptions of safety, predictability, and control, disintegrate the fabric of society, and lead to the mass displacement of civilians from their communities and countries in search of safety (Kevers et al., 2017; Miller & Rasmussen, 2010). In post-migration settings, refugees attempt to create narratives that allow them to make sense of the past as they adjust to life and negotiate places of safety and growth, both within their own exiled communities and in their new host communities (Hussain & Bushan, 2011; Smet et al., 2019). The process of making meaning of past trauma and reappraising worldviews shattered by community-impacting events, if successful, can ease pervasive distress, lead to positive psychological adjustment, and improve long-term integration prospects (Strang & Quinn, 2019). Understanding how perceived group belonging informs meaning-making trajectories of collective trauma is therefore essential to promote arriving refugee communities' recovery and healing.

Since 2011, the Syrian civil war has caused the forced displacement of more than half of its 22 million pre-war population (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2020). What started as a peaceful uprising against the Syrian regime turned into a full-scale, protracted war that led to the killing or disappearance of more than 500,000 people, the internal displacement of 6.7 million civilians repeatedly pushed by shifting front lines (Hassan et al., 2015), and to over 5.6 million people fleeing the country in search of safety. The vast majority of the latter have remained in Syria's neighboring countries in the Middle East and North Africa, while an estimated one million people have sought durable solutions in Western countries of resettlement, arriving as asylum-seekers, resettled refugees, and beneficiaries of other immigration statuses (European Commission, 2016). Prior to making the decision and having the opportunity to flee, Syrian civilians have reported being repeatedly exposed to extreme traumatic events, including bombings, forced confinement, imprisonment, torture, which were often compounded with severe deprivation of basic needs and other potentially meaning-defying wartime stressors and losses that defied pre-war assumptions about the world and shattered community ties (Matos, Indart et al., 2022a; Zeno, 2017). For those who reach resettlement, their pre-flight experiences are additionally aggravated by journeys to safety and subsequent settlement fraught with uncertainty, additional potentially traumatic events (PTEs) and stressors, and adjustment difficulties (Ben Farhat

et al., 2018). It is thus unsurprising that Syrian refugees evidence high incidence of psychological distress as a normal reaction to repeated extreme circumstances, with recent studies documenting rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) between 23% and 43%, often co-morbid with depression and anxiety symptomatology (Peconga & Høgh Thøgersen, 2020). And yet, as with other refugee populations and despite the severity of trauma, Syrian refugees are also expected to perceive psychological benefits from their past experiences (Chan et al., 2016).

Psychological adjustment in the aftermath of trauma has been posited to require cognitive adaptation efforts that enable individuals to restore or exceed pre-trauma levels of psychological functioning (Taylor, 1983). According to Park's theoretical meaning-making model (Park, 2010), individuals possess core beliefs about themselves, the world, and their place in the world, and have desired goals and values that inform their lives' purpose. Together, beliefs, goals, and subjective sense of purpose comprise one's global meaning. These central cognitive structures give people a sense of predictability about their lives and provide them with a lens through which to interpret life experiences. When faced with an event that is perceived as discrepant from their global meaning, individuals experience distress that can trigger attempts to find comprehensibility and assign significance to the event, thereby reducing trauma-induced suffering. This search for meaning may lead to reappraising the traumatic event in order to fit one's global meaning or to adjusting beliefs and goals shattered by trauma. When successful, meaning-making can lead to positive changes in psychological functioning, which has been operationalized through such constructs as perceived posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), increased self-efficacy, well-being, or quality of life (Cheng et al., 2014).

Although both searching for and finding meaning in the aftermath of trauma are essentially individual, intrapsychic processes, meaning-making also occurs on a relational level through discussions with others (Kevers & Rober, 2020). In populations exposed to collective violence, the meanings survivors assign to the event tend to be construed within the community, as individuals seek social support as well as the perspectives of others to interpret the event and its impact on themselves and the community (Hirshberger, 2018; Tuval-Mashiach & Dekel, 2014). This need for co-authored meaning reconstruction is especially salient in non-Western communities of a collectivist nature and can be fostered through adaptive within-group coping strategies that can help restore connectedness, trust, and safety in shattered communities (Hasan et al., 2018; Smet et al., 2019). As the field of

trauma recovery moves toward considering the ability to make sense of the trauma as a central aspect of survivors' healing (Schok et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2016), understanding meaning-making as socially construed provides opportunities for individual and community healing (Hirshberger, 2018).

There have been important advances in meaning-making research with refugee populations, where investigators have tested some of its theoretical propositions, such as meanings-made of trauma, reappraisals of core beliefs, cognitive and emotional processing, or generational appraisals of collective trauma (Adedoyin, 2014; Fivush et al., 2017; Kelmendi et al., 2020). However, given the dynamic nature of the refugee experience, refugees' recurrent susceptibility to meaning-defying PTEs, and propositions in the refugee trauma literature suggesting that meaning-making is an ongoing process with no defined end (Frounfelker et al., 2020; Tuval-Mashiach & Dekel, 2014), it is important to investigate changes in meaning over time and consider the impact of place and circumstances of settlement on cognitive reappraisals of past experiences.

In the aftermath of the 2015 refugee crisis, Portugal committed to hosting unprecedented—despite symbolic in the larger European Union context—numbers of asylum-seekers relocated from Greece and Italy following Aegean and Mediterranean Sea crossings, as well as UNHCR resettled refugees (Observatório das Migrações, 2020). By the end of 2019, a total of 2144 refugees arrived through these two mechanisms, with Syrians comprising one of the largest arriving groups. Following protracted exposure to armed conflict, complicated migration journeys, and settlement in communities across Portugal, it is important to understand if Syrian war-exposed individuals, despite being recently arrived, perceive positive psychological changes in resettlement and, if so, the cognitive processes that contribute to those changes, as well as how the resettlement experience contributes to perceived benefits.

Considering the centrality of the collective to Syrian identity, and the ability of war to disrupt community ties, this study aims to assess community-informed posttraumatic cognitive reappraisals, understood as socially construed meanings, in a sample of war-exposed Syrian civilians living in Portugal. To do so, we conducted an exploratory qualitative study to capture a diversity of meaning trajectories that focused on examining reappraisals of the Syrian war in resettlement, attempts to repair shattered meanings, and those processes' outputs (i.e., meanings-made) and outcomes (i.e., perceived psychological adjustment).

Materials and Method

Study Design

This study utilizes data from a larger research project that examines how survivors of the refugee experience make meaning of past experiences and achieve psychological adjustment in post-displacement settings. Guided by Park's (2010) integrated meaning-making model, this cross-sectional qualitative study examined posttraumatic cognitive reappraisals of PTEs and global meaning systems in Syrian war-exposed adults through semi-structured cognitive interviews. Cognitive interviews corresponded to Phase 2 of the larger project, and the Arabic language research protocol had previously been tested during Phase 1 Focus Groups.

Participants

Participants were recently arrived Syrian adults living in urban communities across Portugal. Eligibility criteria included (1) having Syrian nationality or background (e.g., stateless Palestinian refugees from Syria), (2) being 18-year-old or older, (3) being in Portugal for a minimum of six months, and (4) being Arabic speaker with English or Portuguese fluency. Prospective participants were excluded if they manifested acute psychological distress or had apparent cognitive deficits. The sample was recruited across continental Portugal through a combination of intentional and snowball sampling. A total of 40 individuals were interviewed between January and May 2019, with one Kurdish man dropping out after becoming distressed during the interview. The final sample thus consisted of 39 participants: 20 men (51.3%) and 19 women (48.7%) between the ages of 19 and 37 (M = 27.1; SD = 4.8). Thirty-one individuals were student refugees (i.e., beneficiaries of higher education programs for refugees), five were relocated from Greece, and three were spontaneous asylum-seekers. Participants' median length of stay in Portugal was 32.7 months (SD = 27.9), ranging from 11 to 67 months. Twenty-four student refugees travelled directly to Portugal largely from Beirut, whereas the remaining 15 individuals spent between two and 59 months in transit, with a mean of 23.2 months (SD = *18.3*). Thirty-four participants were single (87.2%) and five (12.8%) were married. Eighty-four percent (n = 33) had some form of higher education, including doctoral (n = 2, 5.1%), master's (n = 11, 28.2%) and bachelor's (n = 18, 46.1%) degrees, and the remaining six (15.4%) had 12th grade education. Family-inherited religious background was: Muslim-Sunni (n = 16, 41.0%), Muslim-other/non-specific (n = 8, 20.5%), Alawite

(*n* = 7, 17.9%), Ismaili (*n* = 2, 5.1%), Druze (*n* = 2, 5.1%), Christian-Catholic (*n* = 2, 5.1%), and Christian-Orthodox (*n* = 2, 5.1%).

Materials

The study protocol included: (1) a sociodemographic questionnaire developed for the purposes of the study and administered as a structured interview; and (2) a semi-structured interview designed to guide participants through posttraumatic reappraisals of beliefs, goals, and sense of purpose. The Syrian war was set as baseline for a pre- and post-trauma global meaning structure, and individuals were invited to reflect on changes to their cognitions and self through the opening question, "when you think back on your life before the war and now, can you describe how it changed?" Subsequent questions invoked changes to specific aspects of global meaning. For example, on eliciting narratives about sense of purpose, the question "what was life about before the war?" invoked pre-trauma cognitions, with the following probes if participants appeared stuck: "what is it that you lived for before the war, and what is it that you live for now?"

Procedures

Due to the target population being recently arrived, expected high exposure to extreme trauma and significant stressors, and reported research fatigue among the community, outreach strategies were iteratively discussed with, and mediated by, key community leaders and resettlement agencies. Arabic language information materials were disseminated through leaders' and agencies' informal networks, and through postings on the research project's social media accounts (e.g., Facebook). Study materials were developed in English, forward translated to Arabic by a Syrian research consultant, and pre-tested in Focus Groups prior to data collection. To accommodate concerns expressed by participants during protocol pre-testing related to anonymity within the community, individual interviews were conducted without assistance of an Arabic language interpreter, in either English or Portuguese according to participant fluency. Print Arabic versions of all materials were available to participants. Detailed community-, trauma-, and ethics-informed findings from research protocol testing are published elsewhere (Matos, Indart et al., 2022b).

All interviews were conducted by the Lisbon-based Lead Researcher (first author) who is experienced in interviewing survivors of refugee trauma, and who travelled to meet participants in the northern cities of Braga, Guimarães and Oporto (*n* = 18), in central Aveiro and Coimbra (*n* = 10) and the capital Lisbon (*n* = 10), and southern

Évora (n = 1). Researcher and participants met in quiet places of participants' convenience, namely university offices or city parks, for an average of 90 min, and interviews were audio recorded. Prior to enrolling, individuals were informed of the purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of their participation. Bounds of anonymity and confidentiality of information were reviewed, and individuals were given an opportunity to ask questions and clarify any doubts prior to signing consent forms. Although the purpose of the interview was not to narrate PTEs, there was potential for distress and retraumatization as participants reflected on past events and the impact of those experiences on their global meaning. The sample was thus instructed on the nature of symptoms and normal reactions to the retelling of their stories and informed of the possibility of being referred for pro-bono psychosocial support, as needed. At the end of the interview, participants were offered a €10 gift card. Interview follow-up included a message to check on participant wellbeing after revisiting their past for the purposes of the research. The study received ethics approval by ISPA—Instituto Universitário's Ethics Committee (Ref. D/004/09/2018).

Data Analysis

Audio recordings were transcribed, participants' names were replaced and coded, and transcriptions were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006). Park's (2010) meaning-making model provided the structure to analyze participants' cognitive reappraisal trajectories in relation to the war as the collective traumatic event. To encompass an array of different perspectives, the data analysis team included refugee trauma and psychological adjustment researchers (first and fifth authors, respectively), one qualitative methodologies instructor (second author), and two research assistants (RAs) trained in thematic analysis. The first author conducted a first in-depth review of all interview transcripts and created the initial coding, which was preliminarily organized into potential themes that were reviewed and discussed with the co-authors. Using the preliminary thematic map, the RAs analyzed the data set, meeting regularly with the first and second authors to discuss discrepancies, reach consensus, and ensure consistency. Considering the scope of the study, themes were reorganized following the main components of the meaning-making model as a trajectory. Transcripts were examined to identify trajectories of community-informed meaning, i.e., cognitive processing narrated as a collective experience, in relation to the Syrian war as the overall stressor. Data were managed and analyzed using MAXQDA 20 software (VERBI Software, 2019). In the

context of the current study, themes pertaining to psychological distress or to individual reappraisal processes were excluded from the analysis. Throughout both phases of analysis, team members met regularly to review findings, refine themes and subthemes, and discuss narratives that deviated from the thematic map, which gave credence to the diversity of individuals' meaning-making experiences.

Results

Data were organized in four sections: pre-war meaning systems; appraisals of the war; cognitive reappraisals of shattered meanings; and changes in psychological functioning. Themes are discussed in each section and, where subthemes were identified, in the interest of text fluency, they are named in the introductory paragraph and subsequently examined as elements of the overall theme. Figure 3 shows the Thematic Map of identified themes and subthemes with arrows illustrating possible trajectories of cognitive processing.

Pre-War Meaning Systems

Participants spoke of their lives prior to the onset of the war and reflected on three themes of the collective self: Collective identity (subthemes: Muslim; Syrian/Arab), Beliefs about Syria (subthemes: Beautiful and diverse; Peaceful and prosperous; Historically targeted by outside powers), and Community- and family-informed life goals (subthemes: Living a normal and peaceful life; Family and community expectations).

Collective Identity

Participants emphasized two intertwined aspects of their collective identity pertaining to religion and to their Syrian cultural identities. With a large majority Muslim sample, being "Muslim by heritage" (AK, woman, 31) was a sentiment expressed by several participants, who spoke of being raised in religious families that often conformed to cultural expectations. Despite her family not being "really religious," 23-year-old GH reported that "we pray and everything like all Syrians." Religion shaped identities and community relations: "on Friday, everyone goes [to the mosque] to meet their friends and talk with each other. They're not going because of the religion" (BS, man, 27).

Beliefs about Syria

The cultural context provided the structure through which to live and interpret life. Prior to the onset of the war, Syria was predominantly – proudly and longingly – recollected as beautiful and diverse, as well as peaceful and prosperous. As with many others, BM (woman, 26) spoke of wealth and prosperity, "everything was available to us,

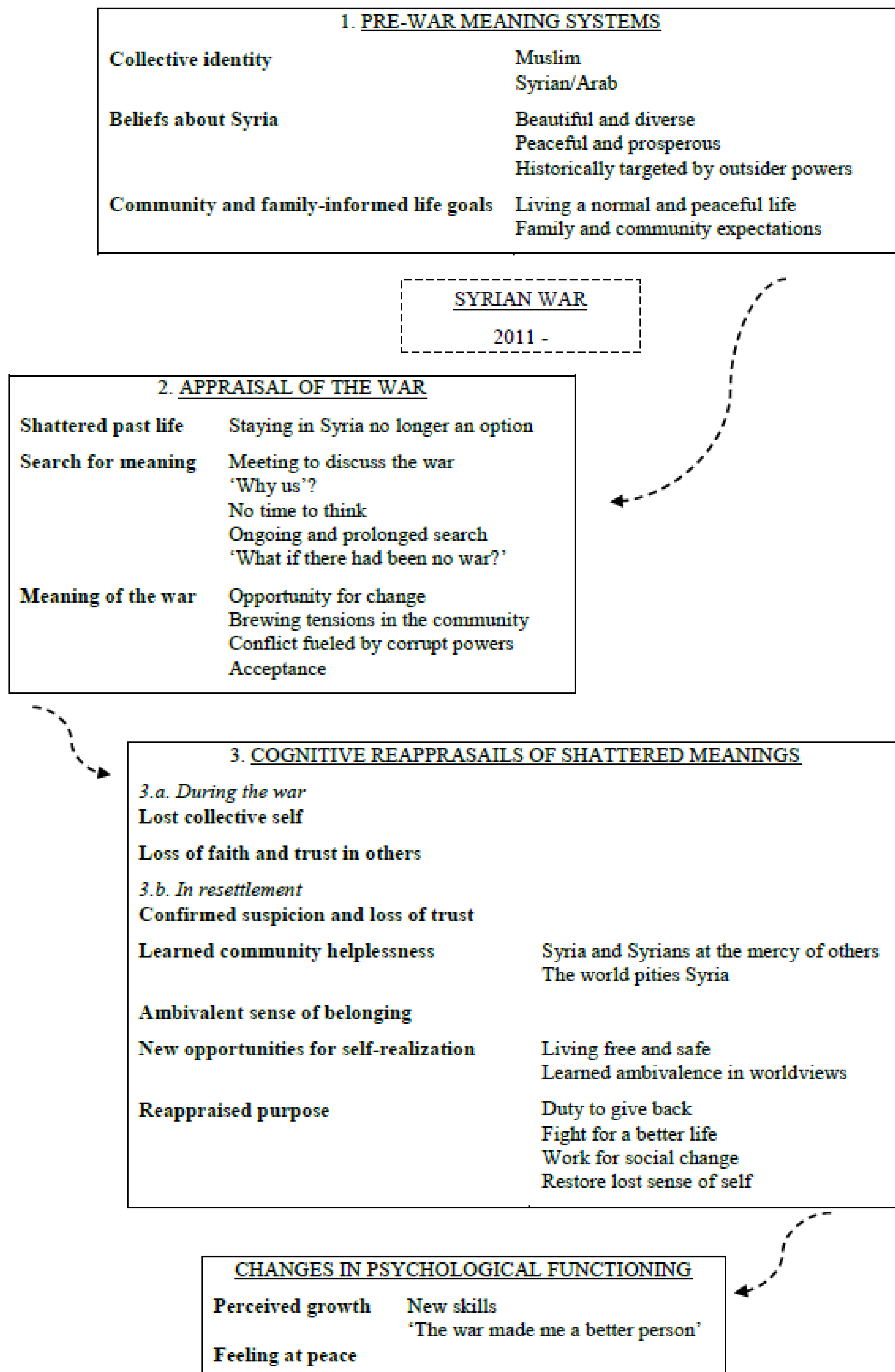

Figure 3. Suggested Trajectories Informed by Beliefs about the Collective

anything you can dream of, you could get before the war," whereas KK (woman, 30) emphasized its cosmopolitan nature, "in Syria, the diversity is amazing! In Damascus, especially. You are walking down the street, you can see girls with skirts, girls with hijab, (…) the diversity is really amazing." On the other hand, there were some participants who reflected on the cycles of violence in the region and Syria's predestination to be targeted by other powers. One woman explained, "if you look at the history, you'll see so much aggression. Wars and stuff. This is something that is transmitted over generations" (AK, woman, 31), and the sentiment was echoed in the words of another participant who stated, "we are under attack, always" (NM, man, 27).

Community- and Family-Informed Life Goals

Participants admitted to rarely giving much thought to how they expected their lives to develop. Most envisaged living a normal and peaceful life, which included studying, getting a house, marrying, having children, etc., which one participant equated to living regular lives "like in Portugal right now" (AI, man, 25). He added: "we had our routines, go to work, university, meet our family and friends". Life essentially conformed to family and cultural expectations, which MS (man, 32) equated to "[living] by inertia, moving with the culture, doing what everybody else did."

Appraisal of the Syrian War

We examined participants' accounts for perceived extent of threat, causes of the war, implications for the future of the community, and acceptance and integration of the event. Three themes were identified and are discussed below: Shattered past life (subtheme: Staying in Syria no longer an option), Search for meaning (subthemes: Meeting to discuss the war; 'Why us [Syrians]?'; No time to think; Ongoing and prolonged search; and 'What if there had been no war?'), and Meaning of the war (subthemes: Opportunity for change; Brewing tensions in the community; Conflict fueled by corrupt powers; and Acceptance).

Shattered Past Life

"When the war started, everything changed" (BS, woman, 32). The onset of the war in 2011 caused severe violation of participants' expectations of safety and predictability, and shattered life's continuity. Participants drew a clear before-and-after the war line where pre-war lives were largely recalled with longing, and the growing violence and terror around them, forced confinements, and severe disruptions of their daily lives were retold with shock and disbelief. NM (man, 27) emphasized his alarm by

stating: “I was living the maximum happiness I could. Going through something that threatened my life or losing things I used to [take for granted] was a big shock for me.” Participants discussed the sudden—for some—or progressive—for others—realization that what they had idealized for the future had ceased being an option, and that their ability to “complete” their lives in Syria was no longer a possibility. Flight decisions were informed by perceived imminent danger, men’s fear of being forcibly recruited into the army, collapsing systems and institutions and ensuing lack of future prospects, and realization of the community’s mass exodus. One participant explained that, although she had always considered the possibility of one-day studying in Europe, with the war, that was “no longer just an option, it’s a need. What small opportunity you had to stay [in Syria], is now gone. You need to go” (ME, woman, 30).

Search for Meaning

The extreme nature of the conflict and repeated challenges to pre-war assumptions triggered in Syrians the need to make sense of the events around them. Because the experience was not just personal, it needed to be examined and interpreted by and within the collective. In our sample, participants reported meeting in small groups to discuss the war, whether within the family or with their friends and others in the community, and, as such, attempting to understand what was going on and find a narrative that helped fit the war into their worldviews. BS (woman, 32) explained: “we had deep discussions about these things. In our small places, we could analyze what was going on. We noticed that it was a big countries game.”

A common formulation as individuals sought comprehensibility amidst the war entailed asking why, articulated not just in the singular (i.e., why me?), but in the plural (i.e., why us?). “What was happening to us raised a lot of questions,” painfully recalled AG (man, 36), “why? Why us? Why me? Why my family? Why are these things happening?” Other ruminative formulations included questioning the fairness and justice of it all, which, in a majority Muslim country, included reaching out to God and examining their religious beliefs. KK (woman, 30) observed: “with the war, people started to lose their faith. Everybody started asking, ‘why is this happening? Oh God. Where’s God?’ Just like, ‘if there is a God, He would not allow this to happen.’”

As the war expanded and became protracted, these ruminative processes appeared to subside or be purposefully postponed as individuals and the community focused on survival and the daily challenges of life in wartime. One man described the

barrage of information and exposure to extreme events on a daily basis that led him to question his pre-war beliefs about the community:

> At the time, I didn't have time to ask myself [why], because we were just receiving information, watching the news, trying to understand what was going on, why people are getting killed, disappearing, why people became zombies suddenly and started killing others. This was hard for me because we were always a country where people loved each other. (NM, man, 27)

The narrative that had sustained individuals during the challenges of the war was subsequently challenged by the compounding forced migration experience, which appeared to reactivate searches for comprehensibility and significance. There were some participants who shared distressing accounts of wanting to find purpose in their experiences, often amidst significant living difficulties in Portugal. Filled with sorrow, RA (woman, 36) stated: "We were forced to leave our country. The future we were building there. [Others] didn't have to leave their countries. They didn't go through these things."

In trying to find worth in their suffering, one final element in the search for meaning emerged, as some participants shared occasionally contemplating what their lives would have been as if had there been no war. Our sample was largely composed of individuals who were adolescents and coming into adulthood as the war broke, which led participants to reflect on their developmental time and how the conflict had shaped their sense of self. ME (woman, 30) explained: "let's say in a virtual reality there was no war. Would I have developed the same way or am I this way because of war?" The forced migration experience compounded by forced separation from loved ones led YK (woman, 25) to wonder what life would have been like if had had she been born in Portugal, a country with no war, where she could be "with [her] family, and all [her] friends." She added: "what if I didn't have to separate from anyone I love?"

Meaning of the War

The war began with an uprising within the larger regional context of the Arab Spring and was largely welcomed as an opportunity for change. There was a shared community purpose and hope that the uprise would lead to needed "change [in] the institutions, change [in] the mentality," (SH, man, 37). In a hope- and excitement-filled account, AK (man, 24) explained how the revolution made room for needed growth and knowledge in the society: "there were really good ideas. People teaching each other about

civil society, separation of religion and state laws, how we can have human rights. All these human rights that we had no idea about!"

However, as the violence escalated, the need to create narratives that helped Syrians make sense of the war increased. Many participants initially appraised the war as being the result of brewing tensions in the community and fueled by corrupt powers. Despite living in peaceful coexistence, as some knew, and others realized, "there was a sort of aggression between Syria's sub-communities that was there for years, which no one had addressed" (SH, man, 37). As the conflict grew and worsened, participants spoke of realizing that they were pawns in a game controlled by political and religious powers that fomented discord in the community. Even if unable or unwilling to assign blame beyond naming an overpowering "they", YK (woman, 25) expressed her frustration as follows: "they made people fight against each other. (…) And it's a game. I don't know the rules of this game, but it's a dirty game. And they are playing with souls." The process of uncovering the perceived truth evidenced by war was lengthy for some, with NM (man, 27) admitting that it had "[taken him] a long time to realize the bad things the regime was doing," whereas for a number of others watching "the army shooting people" (MA, man, 30) was the trigger for their own realization. Especially concerning in a majority-Muslim society was the perception, by the community, of the part religious groups and leaders, both in Syria and elsewhere in the Arab world, played in the war. AK (woman, 30), who was then a practicing Sunni Muslim, stated: "we started to see – me and the community, my friends, my family – how religious leaders were involved in the conflict. So we lost trust in these people."

Despite perceiving significant discrepancies between the events around them and their pre-war beliefs about Syria and their community, some participants were able to integrate and narrate the war as inevitable, and accommodate it within cyclical, generational violence. Several individuals provided similar narratives of regional geopolitics, where their homeland was perceived as a target. SS (woman, 28) stated: "we were raised to know that we were living near the enemy, which is Israel. So, we always knew that there was going to be a war. Now, later, it's going to happen." Despite the preparedness for war, the escalating violence defied expectations. MK (man, 22), who at the beginning of the war was 14 years old, promptly referred back to family-inherited Syrian history: "I understood [what was happening] right away, because my parents went through something similar in the 1980s. Similar, but not as devastating."

Lastly, as the war progressed, it overwhelmingly became too absurd to comprehend, and yet something with which they had to learn to live. In their youth and despite living under constant threat, numerous individuals recounted defying parental instructions to stay home, accepting the possibility of death, as well as painfully realizing that they had learned to accept and live with the horrors of war: “The first time I saw people dead was hard. But the worst was when I *got used to* [emphasis added] seeing people dead” (NM, man, 27).

Cognitive Reappraisals of Shattered Meanings

“I think the war plays a big role in questioning what you believe in.” With this statement, MA (man, 27) insightfully captured the meaning-making processes triggered by the war as an event that overwhelmed individuals’ cognitive structures. Wartime trauma and daily stressors, and the difficulties associated with displacement were repeatedly appraised against participants’ global meaning structures. We identified two themes of wartime meaning reappraisals – Lost collective self and Loss of faith and trust in others – and five themes of reappraisals in resettlement: Learned suspicion and loss of trust; Learned community helplessness (subthemes: Syria and Syrians at the mercy of others; and “the world pities Syria”); Ambivalent sense of belonging; New opportunities for self-realization (subtheme: Learned ambivalence in worldviews); and Reappraised purpose (subthemes: Duty to give back; Fight for a better life; Work for social change; and Restore sense of self).

During the War

Lost Collective Self. The war was understood as having created or evidenced tensions along religious and political lines, which were hard to reconcile with pre-war community beliefs and sense of a cohesive collective. As neighbors and colleagues turned on each other, “you realize that something was wrong from the beginning” (MZ, man, 28), and that Syrians’ previously harmonious lives were, in fact, “a lie”. As with AK (man, 24), many felt that the collective self had been artificially held together through repression: “we lived in a lie. That we are a unity, we are one piece. Actually, people hated each other, inside, deeply. We were just not allowed to say it.” Whereas others longed for their lost beloved community:

> We started to feel, ‘oh, he is Sunni, he hates me, and I hate him.’ It’s a very bad thing. Because we have never been like this in Syria. We live with Christians and Muslim and Kurdish and every religion, and we were very happy. And I think every person agrees with me. In Syria, we were very happy, but I don’t know what happened… (BM, woman, 26)

Loss of Faith and Trust in Others. As the fabric of the community disintegrated, generalized suspicion took hold. Participants shared deep, sorrow-filled accounts of losing faith in their leaders and losing trust in each other. "There was a feeling of having lost the trust we had", as GH (woman, 23) put it. She added, "after the [onset of the] war, I lost faith in my friends," which carried over into Syrians' lives in exile: "I believe that people now have a problem trusting each other."

In Resettlement

In resettlement, years after initial post-war reappraisals, participants spoke at length about changed beliefs, goals, and purpose, informed by their new setting.

Suspicion and Loss of Trust. In Portugal, the war continued to be understood as the result of the will of the regime and religious groups, as well as outside powers. With some time and geographic distance, some participants assigned blame squarely on their own community and culture. "We created the war!" decried AK (woman, 31), "we have to confess that we are responsible for this damage. We throw responsibility around, but this is craziness! We are an integral part of this war. Our mentality, our vision, our way…" Suspicion and distrust therefore continued to severely disrupt community relations. Despite well-intended efforts by host organizations to create spaces for community dialogue and healing, with unresolved tensions and the war still active, Syrians did not appear equipped to engage in fruitful dialogue: "we had summer school this year in my university and there were a lot of Syrians – the theme was "rebuilding Syria" – and all the time people were arguing and fighting. There was all this tension because of the war" (GH, woman, 23).

Learned Helplessness. Perceived community helplessness derived from the realization that the still ongoing war was fueled by geopolitics, where outside countries continued to dictate the fate of Syria – "[the war] is not in the hands of Syrians anymore. Maybe we started it, but we can't finish it now" (MA, man, 24) –, and of Syrians – "my dream was to study in a US university, because they are the best in the world. But then I lost my scholarship. I believe they didn't issue me a visa because I'm Syrian" (MW, woman, 32). As nationals of the largest refugee-source country, Syrians are often depicted for their vulnerabilities and weaknesses, which was largely shown to humiliate and hurt participants' sense of pride. "Before the war, nobody heard about Syria, but now everybody talks about us, poor people," explained BS (woman, 32). SS (woman, 28), who gave unwavering accounts of the strength of her people and pride in her community and

heritage, related feeling hurt when she heard other Syrians in exile say that they do not want to go back after the war:

> Okay, I know our country is not that good and maybe you don't want to go back, but don't say it. Because when other people hear it, they will say, 'what kind of country is it that their own people want to leave it?'

Ambivalent Sense of Belonging. As participants attempted to reconcile past lives and shattered identities with the opportunities before them in the new country, they struggled with understanding where they now fit in. This theme was characterized by ambivalence and a diversity of experiences, where most participants were still reconciling their loss with their newly found affiliations, often negotiated within family and community expectations. BS (man, 27), who had grown used to the European and Portuguese cultures and struggled to imagine the possibility of adjusting back to life in Syria, shared a recent conversation with his mother. As they revisited the delicate subject of his potential return, she replied: "'who said you will ever come back?' She was prepared for it! She wants me to come back, but she [finally understands] that it's better to live here." Others, such as student refugee ME (woman, 30), conveyed distressing accounts of lost belonging. After traveling back to Syria for summer break, ME recounted: "I came here [to Portugal] and didn't fit in. So I always thought that when I go back [to Syria] I would fit in more. But I went there and I didn't. Now I don't fit anywhere, and I don't know what to do." Lastly, an important few reported opposite-end allegiances, be it finding, in Portugal, their new home, be it through strengthened allegiance to the homeland. SS (woman, 28) declared: "I feel more connected to my homeland! (…) My [Portuguese] boyfriend knows that, for me, Syria is my final destination."

New Opportunities for Self-Realization. Students in our sample shared guilt-laden accounts of attempting to resolve the discrepancy between the destruction caused by the war and the opportunity the war provided for them to study abroad. They struggled with the benefit they derived from all the destruction: "there are opportunities because of the war. I will not say that's a good thing, but it's one thing that would never have happened without the war" (AO, man, 23). As participants discussed negotiated identities and place in the new country, they narrated rich accounts of the possibilities offered by the resettlement setting, with many talking about the ability to live free and safe in Portugal. AO (man, 31) reported telling his fiancée back home that "we can have a good life [in Portugal], find a good job, and feel safer." Coming from a majority Sunni-Muslim

country with strict rules about women's behavior, some young women passionately shared experiences of newly found freedom and identity. KK (woman, 30) stated:

> I survived a controlled society. I feel like I had one life before and now I have a new life. So, I survived a society where they judge people and judge girls for what they wear. And now I am free.

When reflecting on beliefs of justice, kindness, or perceived control over one's life, participants seldom gave unequivocal answers. As one woman put it when asked if the world was fair, "it's like you're asking me if the world is black or white. I can't answer that question. It's a really wide range of colors!" (AK, woman, 31). This type of thought process reflected not only the complexity of participants' experiences, but also evidenced layered meaning systems. There was ambivalence in worldviews regarding safety (e.g., "[the world is safe] depending on the country you live in, the people you live with, and the conditions of your life."; BM, woman, 26), benevolence (e.g., "there are bad people who make the world worst, but there are always good people who help others go through difficult times."; HH, man, 36), and fairness (e.g., "you don't think about what is fair or not fair. You have to think: 'I have this [scholarship] opportunity and I have to take care of myself. Nobody else will do it.'"; MS, man, 32).

Reappraised Purpose. Life in resettlement provided a unique opportunity to rebuild their lives in peace and safety, as well as to restore individuals' sense of purpose. Because the majority of participants were working towards graduate and undergraduate degrees, in our sample, subjective purpose accounts were often informed by their student refugee identities. "I'm here studying because war happened in my country, because people suffered, and this is a responsibility that I don't take lightly. I cannot remove this from who I am, and I have to give something back" (AO, man, 23). This feeling was shared by many students, who struggled to reconcile the guilt they felt for their privilege as beneficiaries of student programs, an overwhelming sense of responsibility to succeed, and a perceived obligation to work towards Syria's post-war reconstruction and healing. In the privacy and anonymity of the research interview, however, a few students guiltily admitted to having changed their original plans of return: "I don't think I'm going back. Honestly, I've been thinking about bringing my sisters. Here we can build a better future. I'm really sad and I'm sorry for that, but we have to think about our future" (BM, woman, 26).

Having lived through the unpredictability of war and displacement, many participants learned to be cautious about the future and to focus on immediate, tangible

goals. As some envisioned a future in Portugal, their lives were now guided by the need to prove themselves to the host community: “the Portuguese gave me this opportunity of a lifetime, and I need to prove to them and to the world that I deserve it” (HH, man, 36). In the case of others, after all the struggles and suffering, their current purpose was informed by survival and restoration of their pre-war self: “I want to find a job and be totally independent. Focus on myself, my efforts, my skills. This is my new goal: to return again to who I once was” (AK, woman, 31).

Changes in Psychological Functioning

Although the lessons learned from the war and the refugee experience led participants to report often feeling anxious and depressed, with a small number of them reporting clinically-significant posttraumatic stress disorder (As part of the larger research study, participants in this sample completed the Harvard Trauma Questionnaire—Arabic Version [31]. Findings pertaining to prevalence of trauma and PTSD are reported elsewhere [9]), participants also retold accounts of improved psychological functioning. There were two themes of positive psychological adjustment: Perceived growth (subthemes: New skills; and ‘The war made me a better person’; and Feeling at peace).

Perceived Growth

In our largely young, single, student sample, the war and the subsequent safe and purpose-informed settlement in Portugal created opportunities for self-affirmation and growth. There were abundant accounts of increased courage, strength, and kindness. RN, a recently arrived 19-year-old woman explained, “I think that these events were good for me, because without the war I couldn’t be a strong woman,” whereas another attested to having “more appreciation for life now” (YK, woman, 25). Another spoke of the newly acquired freedom and “courage to talk about [her] beliefs” (KK, woman, 31). As beneficiaries of higher education programs for refugees, several students and former students also perceived benefits from the new skills acquired. AO (man, 31) summed it up and spoke of optimism: “here I learned languages, I have new skills, and now I’m working. So, I look at the future in a really optimistic way.”

The second subtheme was characterized by especially moving and love-filled narratives: “you feel that you need to be with people who really love you, who really support you. (…) The war made us more emotional towards each other, more supportive of each other,” recounted YK (woman, 25). As she integrated the ambivalence of reappraised worldviews and spoke of learned unfairness, RJ (woman, 27) added: “at the

same time [the war] makes you a better person, because you suffered a lot and you do not want someone else to suffer. So, yes, I feel motivated to do more and be better."

Feeling at Peace

As they wrapped up their interviews, a few participants shared pride-filled accounts as to how far they had come in the aftermath of a war and forced displacement. They narrated ways in which they had been able to integrate their past into their rebuilt selves. When facing bouts of sadness or distress, AK (man, 24) reminded himself to think "rationally". He explained, "'rationally' means respecting the experience I had. (…) It built me. I'm a different person. I told you, I'm proud of this journey." Despite their youth, they also gave insightful narratives of healing as a journey fostered by safety, peace, and kindness in the host country:

> When I feel depressed, I close my eyes and remind myself that I'm in Europe and that I am actually working on my dreams. So, I always remember that. (…) People here [in Portugal] surround us and they are very good with us so we can feel more at peace. So right now, I feel like I'm healing. (DA, woman, 24)

Discussion

Understanding meaning-making processes in the aftermath of collective violence as relational and informed by culture, community, and place is essential to advance evidence-based practices of trauma recovery and healing in refugee populations (Hassan et al., 2015, Kevers et al., 2020; Sorgen, 2015). This study examined meaning appraisals as collectively and socially construed, in a sample of Syrian refugees living in Portugal. Although we used a pre-war/post-migration structure in the interviews to access changed cognitions, most participants were able to provide rich accounts of their journeys in meaning: from pre-war assumptions about the community and the collective self, through initial and evolving appraisals of the war while in Syria, perceived violations of and discrepancies from pre-war community assumptions, revisited need to seek comprehensibility and significance, and wartime reappraisal of shattered meanings. Once in Portugal, meaning-making narratives were revisited with the distance allowed by time, and informed by the new settlement and community, new stressors, and individuals' lived experiences. These narratives contributed to concurrent positive and negative meanings-made and subsequently to posttraumatic psychological adjustment.

Our sample was generally young, with participants coming into late adolescence/early adulthood at the onset of the war, and also highly educated. The latter was unsurprising considering Syria's massive investment in higher education opportunities, especially for women and in the fields of science and technology (Watenpaugh et al., 2013). Albeit not an intentional recruitment strategy, the majority of participants were graduate and undergraduate students arriving under the Portuguese Government's Global Platform for Syrian Students (GP4SYS), which was created in 2013 to provide safe access to higher education opportunities for Syrians affected by war (GP4SYS, 2019). The inclusion of war-exposed individuals regardless of refugee and derivative statuses enriches our understanding of the diversity of arriving communities' lived experiences and counters all-encompassing and constraining legal categories that may silence individual and sub-group perspectives (Smet et al., 2019). This is especially important for Syrian forced migrants, whose multiple group identities and belongings have been shown to be protective and to help provide a sense of identity continuity in exile (Smeekes et al., 2017).

Participants' meaning-making trajectories were examined in relation to the war as the overall collective stressor, despite individual exposure to different types of potentially shattering trauma and losses and focused on perceptions of the collective self and community functioning. Pre-war beliefs were often prefaced with "we always knew that," followed by aligned statements about regional geopolitics, which offered an initial narrative structure into which to integrate the war. However, as the conflict expanded and violence intensified, previous assumptions about a unified collective were violated and perceived as flawed and maintained by a repressive regime that quieted dissent (Al Azmeh et al., 2020). In our study, the overall forced migration aspect of participants' experience was painfully articulated as losing an imagined future in Syria, which required reworking shattered life goals that were informed by community and family expectations, and thus simply described as living "normal lives". As proposed by the meaning-making model, the war was progressively perceived as discrepant from pre-2011 beliefs about the country and the collective self, prompting, in Syrians, the need to make sense of the events. Search for meaning entailed two processes—search for comprehensibility and search for significance—which have been posited to occur sequentially (Park, 2010), but may, as we observed, not only be concurrent but also reinitiated and revisited with displacement and new social context. Participants' initial appraisals of the war often

entailed relational processing through, likely adaptive (Hassan et al., 2015), small-group discussions with family and friends where they attempted to build a narrative that helped explain and integrate the conflict. This need for comprehensibility was often triggered through plural “why us?” formulations, as individuals sought to understand the implications of the war, not just for themselves but for the community. This finding aligns with previous studies with refugee populations reporting analogous community-informed verbalizations (Tuval-Mashiach & Dekel, 2014).

One salient aspect of this search pertained to the urge many felt to see worth in the war and in their post-war lived experiences. This intentional cognitive reframing evidenced the disruption the war had imposed on prior expectations of continuity (Fivush et al., 2017) and, when revisited, led to mourning-filled contemplations of whom these early adults might have grown up to be, and the paths their lives would have taken, had there been no war. To some, these ongoing and distressing search processes were frequently concomitant with newly found purpose, intentional benefit-finding in the opportunities provided by life in resettlement, and perceived growth. This finding suggests that individuals with layered meaning systems, subject to cumulative PTEs that differentially violate specific cognitions (Chung et al., 2017; Matos, Água et al., 2022), and with unresolved meaning searches can experience both growth and distress throughout their meaning-making trajectories (Steger et al., 2015).

Much as with the war, shattered beliefs and goals also required reappraisals at different points in the journey, thus confirming our two initial propositions that meaning-making is both a trajectory and a dynamic process that can be triggered by new violations or by a setting that allows survivors time to make meaning of their pasts. In the early months and years after resettlement, refugees are often focused on the daily challenges of adjusting to their new lives with little ability to address past losses and trauma and to engage in difficult reflections (Hynie, 2018). This form of avoidant coping, which can temporarily be adaptive despite associated poorer mental health outcomes (Huijts et al., 2012; Seglem et al., 2014), effectively delays cognitive processing until survivors reach a more favorable social context. In our sample, Portugal was generally reported as a welcoming and safe country. At the height of the 2015 European refugee crisis, communities across Portugal had eagerly readied themselves to host arriving refugees (Observatório das Migrações, 2019), and this welcoming context may have provided the conditions for arriving Syrians to reappraise the world and the self in a positive light.

Participants' ambivalent reappraisals of worldviews regarding safety, benevolence, and fairness, which were frequently prefaced by cautious statements related to geographical location, luck or other life circumstances, thus suggest that place and host community not only inform meaning-making processes but also provide sources for meaning itself (Brinn & Auerbach, 2015).

Considering the centrality of religion to Syrian identity, group belonging, and place in society (Smeekes et al., 2017), we were surprised by the non-salience of religious themes in our findings. This may have been in part due to the study's focus on meaning as socially and collectively construed, and to participants being recently arrived and not yet available to engage in more existential meaning-making. Of note, the role religion played in severing community ties during the war and the loss of trustworthy religious leadership may have effectively robbed participants of an important dimension of within-group coping (Ersahin, 2020; Hasan et al., 2018). Because religious beliefs generally offer relatively stable and accommodating cognitive structures (Park, 2005; Tuval-Mashiach & Dekel, 2014), it is possible that, with time, individuals will further change their perceptions of the war and circumstances of displacement to fit pre-war religious structures. Yet the extent to which religion may have informed this sample's cognitive reappraisals of both PTEs and global meaning thus far remains unknown. To help close this gap, future studies should investigate Syrians' religion-informed trajectories of meaning-making as intra- and inter-personal processes and explore the impact of coping strategies and place of settlement on post-migration religious identity, rituals, and practices.

In our study, participants' subjective negative reappraisals about their own community remained unresolved and a source of significant distress, which reinforced the uprootedness of the displacement experience and perceived lost sense of belonging (Zeno, 2017). Despite unsuccessful attempts by host organizations in Portugal to create spaces for dialogue and healing, it is possible that the ongoing war may have prevented students' ability to begin repairing the shattered cognitions that informed the collective self. The absence of subnarratives related to social support in resettlement was also surprising given the significance of the community to Syrians' identity and the role of social support is fostering adaptive meaning-making (Henrickson et al., 2013; Park et al., 2017). This void in the narratives may both justify individuals' persistent negative reappraisals of

beliefs about the community (i.e., meaning-making as output), as well as be conducive to maladaptive psychological adjustment (i.e., meaning-making as process).

Although it is possible that the ongoing war and recent arrival to Portugal may have contributed to incomplete meaning-making processes at the time of data collection, the coexistence of negative, positive, and ambivalent meanings-made points to meaning-making in the aftermath of refugee trauma as a dynamic process with no defined end, where collective identity and narrative are reshaped both over time and across generations (Frounfelker et al., 2020; Kelmendi et al., 2020). Living free and in peace in resettlement provided our youthful, single, and student-majority sample ample opportunities for agency and growth. The goal of working towards a university degree may have been protective against some of the challenges of forced migration (Crea, 2016) and greatly informed students' subjective sense of purpose, despite often struggling with overwhelming sense of responsibility and guilt over deriving any benefit from such a devastating event as the war. Increased compassion, changed priorities, and preoccupation with the common good, whether by using their newly acquired skills towards post-war reconstruction or giving back to both home and host communities, may provide pathways to restore a lost sense of collective self and promote posttraumatic growth (Shakespeare-Finch et al., 2014).

Thus far, mental health research with Syrian refugees has mostly centered on negative psychological outcomes of exposure to collective trauma for the self and the community (Hendrickx et al., 2020). This qualitative study focused on eliciting community-informed meaning-making processes that conduce to positive psychological adjustment. The study makes important contributions to the literature that stress the decisive role that host communities can play in promoting adaptive adjustment when refugees are provided with safe opportunities for self-realization. Although the Syrian war disrupted community ties, reversed family roles, and led to the loss of home, country, humanity, and dignity (Chung et al., 2017; Zeno, 2017), our findings suggest that the need some participants felt to seek deeper meaning in their experiences through purposive meaning-making processes may have led them to perceiving growth in their restored selves. Manifestations of posttraumatic growth included increased empathy and courage, new possibilities, sense of pride in their journeys, and greater appreciation for life (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004) that align with recent studies with Syrian refugees (Şimşir et al., 2021). In line with the posttraumatic growth literature, these subjective positive

changes require a significant level of shattering of previous cognitions, which the war provided, and the subsequent integration of the past into a coherent narrative (De Castella et al., 2013). This process was incisively articulated by one participant as the need he felt to respect his own experience, which "built" him.

Our work makes important contributions to the meaning-making literature by introducing a trajectory analysis of meaning-making from pre-trauma global meaning through post-settlement psychological adjustment. Theoretical propositions suggest that meaning-making occurs within the context of the culture and the community (Park et al., 2017), which is especially important for individuals belonging to collectivist societies and survivors of community-impacting trauma. By focusing on community and collective processing and analyzing meaning as a journey, our findings suggest that: meaning-making is dynamic and occurs at different points throughout displacement according to individual and community circumstances and lived experiences; the integrated meaning-making model is robust and sufficiently comprehensive and flexible to capture the experiences of non-Western survivors of collective, cumulative trauma; and survivors of refugee trauma can make both adaptive and maladaptive reappraisals of cognitive-specific stressors, which subsequently contribute to coexisting positive and negative psychological adjustment.

This study is not without limitations. Participants were interviewed eight years after the onset of the war, therefore their retrospective recollections of pre-war and wartime beliefs and goals are likely influenced by multiple biases, including individually experienced traumas, displacement journeys, and life circumstances. Further, although in some ways having a sample comprised primarily of student refugees was advantageous in terms of participants' abilities to give in-depth accounts of their meaning-making processes, this group's experiences may not be representative of those of other war-exposed Syrians living in Portugal, despite the sample's geographic diversity and our attempts to include Syrian nationals regardless of legal status. The interviews were not conducted in participants' native Arabic, which may have posed difficulties for participants to fully and accurately express the nuances of their meaning-making efforts. Lastly, this study only focused on the impact of the war as baseline for meaning violation and on meaning trajectories related to the collective, and hence does not represent the totality of individuals' meaning-making experiences, including the wealth of individually-experienced traumas, intrapersonal reappraisals, and coping strategies, namely those

related to religion, faith, and spiritual dimensions of healing, that may facilitate or hinder adjustment. Future research should investigate intrapersonal meaning-making trajectories in the aftermath of the collective trauma, including reappraisals in transit countries, to comprehensively capture refugees' journeys in meaning.

Conclusions

The Syrian war has profoundly and critically severed community ties and Syrians' collective identity. Adaptive meaning-making of those shattered cognitive structures will require ongoing and iterative reappraisals, possibly over generations, as displaced Syrians attempt to make sense of the war, find benefit in their experiences, and rebuild narratives that can restore their lost sense of self. Host communities are key to promoting adaptive psychological adjustment, by providing: welcoming and safe places that help repair refugees' lost sense of humanity and rebuild community trust; designing host programs that incorporate opportunities for self-realization and purpose (e.g., access to higher education or to meaningful jobs); and providing healing opportunities for within- and inter-community exchanges that help facilitate meaning-making and psychological growth in survivors of refugee trauma.

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8

General Discussion

Psychological adjustment to the refugee experience is influenced by numerous factors, including pre-flight trauma exposure, sociodemographic characteristics, cultural aspects, as well as current and ongoing stressors. Chief among these factors is refugees' ability to make meaning of their experiences and integrate them into a coherent life narrative that restores comprehensibility and significance to their lives. To date, the integrated meaning-making model proposes the most comprehensive theoretical framework for psychological adjustment to trauma, incorporating important – but often overlooked – determinants of adjustment, such as event appraisals, meanings-made, or the dynamic nature of meaning-making trajectories (Steger & Park, 2012; Park, 2010). Recent studies evaluating positive psychological adjustment in refugee samples have generally supported propositions that these survivors of complex, community-impacting, extreme events can experience improved psychological wellbeing (Chan et al., 2016; Jafari et al., 2022). And yet, the cognitive processes that refugees use to repeatedly reduce perceived violations and associated distress, as well as restore meaning remain largely unaddressed; neither has research been conducted that comprehensively investigates the content of refugees' meaning structures nor the intrapersonal and relational dimensions of meaning-making.

The present dissertation aimed to address these gaps several ways. First, by testing the applicability of a Western-developed psychological adjustment model and its related constructs to Middle Eastern survivors of complex trauma. This was a crucial first step to prevent imposing Western norms on non-Western trauma survivors and to contribute to the operationalization of the model as applied to other populations. Second, by addressing the totality of the refugee experience, and not just premigration extreme trauma, as having the potential to shatter global meaning, thus expanding the refugee trauma literature to encompass subjective perceptions of trauma. Third, by using mixed-methods to explore perceived meaning violations, which helps move the field forward as it (a) offers an innovative perspective to the cross-cultural adaptation of psychological instruments and (b) contributes to operationalize a key element on which cognitive adaptation theories and models rest, that is, the assumption that significant shattering of core beliefs is required for individuals to eventually perceive psychological benefits, including posttraumatic growth, in the aftermath of trauma. Fourth, by exploring meaning-making as a process and not simply an outcome, and using qualitative methodology to help capture the breadth of individuals' experiences. Lastly, and despite meaning-making being essentially an

intrapsychic process, by examining meaning-making trajectories through a relational and community-informed lens, which provides important insight into how refugee communities rebuild themselves and reframe collective narratives.

Informed by the meaning-making model, in the present dissertation, we thus aimed to identify the key determinants of psychological adjustment in a sample of Syrian refugees resettled in Portugal, with the purpose of informing evidence-based practice, policy, and research. In Chapter 2, a review of empirical studies was conducted to assess the evidence-based knowledge of different meaning-making components that subsequently informed data collection. Given the potential vulnerability of refugee populations as research subjects, in Chapter 3, trauma- and ethics-informed issues related to the two-phase study protocol design and implementation were explored. In Chapter 4, mixed-methods were used to assess determinants of psychological distress in resettlement, namely exposure to traditional refugee trauma events (e.g., war or torture), as well as significant daily hardships throughout flight journeys, and to examine the prevalence of posttraumatic stress disorder and symptoms of depression and anxiety. Chapter 5 provided a detailed overview of the cross-cultural adaptation of the Global Meaning Violations Scale (GMVS) for use with Arabic-speaking refugees. The resulting GMVS-ArabV was used to assess the extent to which trauma exposure had shattered refugees' beliefs and goals. Lastly, Chapters 6 and 7 both qualitatively examined meaning-making trajectories: the former based on intrapersonal processes informed by Islam as Syrian Muslims' core cognitive structure; and the latter based relational processes informed by a sense of collective identity. Positive psychological adjustment was analyzed through Chapter 7 findings.

In the following sections, we will provide a brief overview of each chapter's main findings as they relate to the objectives described in the Introduction. Major findings and contributions to the operationalization of meaning-related constructs will then be discussed, along with suggestions for future lines of inquiry, which will be followed by a summary of the study's main limitations. The chapter will end with implications of the present work for practice and policy.

Summary of Findings

To address Objective 1 and evaluate the conceptual equivalence and applicability of the model to the target population two steps were taken. Step 1 (Chapter 2) entailed a review of empirical studies that investigated specific aspects of meaning in refugee samples, in research that largely focused on addressing overall determinants of refugee mental health. Although only a few studies were available, and none with Syrian samples, this exercise provided important clues into how the theoretical model might be operationalized with these populations. Investigating meaning-making as a journey instead of an end-point, examining individual as well as community-informed processes, and exploring what triggers meaning searches were suggested as being particularly relevant in the case of refugee populations. Step 2 (Chapters 3 and 5) addressed the preliminary testing of constructs. Given the cultural, language, and traumatic diversity of the target population, a Committee of Experts was gathered that included, on the one hand, refugee community leaders, resettlement and community organizations, cultural mediators, and key stakeholders in Portugal, who counseled on culture, language, outreach, and logistical issues during project design and implementation, and, on the other hand, Syrian and Arab mental health scholars and practitioners based in Portugal, US, Jordan, and Germany, who advised on the cross-cultural adaptation and equivalency of constructs. Preliminary findings supported the suitability of constructs and model to explain Syrian refugees' psychological adjustment to trauma. The concept of having a set of core beliefs and goals that provide a lens through which to interpret life experiences and inform one's sense of purpose or meaning appeared to adequately represent study participants' experiences; so did the cognitive reappraisal processes triggered by perceived meaning discrepancies and associated distress when faced with extreme events. Despite the complexity of the psychological constructs and processes, these findings, informed by the review of the literature, committee expert opinions, and validity evidence based on response processes during Phase 1 Focus Groups (FG), effectively allowed the research protocol to be implemented during Phase 2 individual interviews.

Chapter 4 used mixed-methods to investigate the prevalence of pre- and postmigration potentially-traumatic events (PTEs) as potential sources of meaning violations and therefore as determinants of psychological distress. This allowed us to address Objective 3. Despite the sample being largely composed of student-refugees, who benefited from safe pathways to resettlement in Portugal, our findings revealed exposure

to significant numbers of different life-threatening events, including torture, with 25% of the overall sample endorsing diagnostic criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) eight years after the beginning of the war. In addition to the traditionally documented extreme war trauma events, the study provided important insight into wartime daily stressors and postflight state-sponsored host conditions, status of the ongoing conflict, and temporary returns to Syria as sources of global meaning violations, and hence important determinants of ongoing distress.

Global meaning violations were assessed through mixed-methods in Chapter 5. To meet Objective 4, we cross-culturally adapted Park and colleagues' (2016) GMVS and used the GMVS-ArabV to guide us in assessing the extent global beliefs' and goals' violations in relation to the Syrian war as overall baseline event. This work makes two significant contributions to the literature. On the one hand, it helps advance the field of cross-cultural adaptation of psychological instruments by using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to assess the extent to which respondents understand item content, language, and response scale, and, ultimately, ensure that participants access the constructs addressed in the instrument. On the other hand, it contributes to the literature on psychological adjustment to trauma by helping operationalize meaning violations as a stand-alone construct, as applied to non-Western populations. Although the war provided the baseline for meaning violations and, as expected, war-related events were found to violate preexisting beliefs and goals, findings from this study confirmed Chapter 4 suggestions regarding the potential for less objectively-severe daily stressors, both during wartime and in resettlement, to be capable of shattering specific global meanings.

Three important Chapter 5 findings subsequently informed this dissertation's final two studies. The first pertained to the fact that a pre-/posttrauma (in our case, prewar/postwar) structure proved insufficient to capture the complexity of meaning violations in Syrian refugees. Participants narrated still evolving reappraisal journeys that suggested meaning-making as both a process and an outcome, which suggested the pertinence of examining meaning-making as a trajectory (Chapters 6 and 7). The second finding pertained to the centrality of religion in the lives of Syrians: not only did religious beliefs show lowest violations, but beliefs regarding justice, safety or control, in many cases, appeared to derive from core religious beliefs. As such, a determination was made to investigate meaning-making informed by Syrians' major religion, Islam (Chapter 6).

The last finding concerned goal violations. In our young, highly educated, largely student-refugee sample, it was not surprising that the war had significantly violated educational and career aspirations. However, we also found high associations between violations of goals related to community and social support and participants' aspirations regarding self-acceptance or inner peace, which confirmed the centrality of the collective to Syrians' identity. This finding confirmed the need to investigate meaning-making of the war as a relational process informed by culture, community, and place (Chapter 7).

Chapter 6 comprehensively investigated religious meaning-making trajectories. Participants narrated complex, dynamic, and often still unresolved intrapersonal appraisal processes that centered on repeated and severe challenges to religious beliefs over the course of the war and forced displacement, which triggered recurrent, automatic as well as deliberate, searches for comprehensibility and significance. To a small few, meaning violations had proven too extensive to be repaired, leading to complete loss of faith. Although temporarily adaptive, atheism may become too distressing and unsustainable in the long-run, given the identity, cultural, and community void left by the loss of such a core and comprehensive cognitive structure, and thus eventually trigger new meaning-making processes. At the opposite end of the spectrum, some individuals experienced a strengthening and reaffirmation of their religious beliefs, which provided pathways to successful psychological adjustment. Most participants, however, perceived different degrees of decreased and/or adjusted beliefs and religious practice, which meant that Islam remained a foundational cognitive structure that provided a source of stability, identity, and continuity with a pre-war life and self.

Lastly, in Chapter 7, meaning-making trajectories were investigated in relation to community-informed global meanings, including relational reappraisals, and their impact on perceived psychological adjustment. Similarly to Chapter 6 findings, community-informed meaning-making trajectories were prone to being reinitiated and revisited with time, place, and new stressors, and likely over generations to come. Likewise, resettlement marked an important turning point in their meaning-making journeys. If on the one hand, Portugal, a secular Western country, offered freedom and opportunity for self-affirmation, to practice according to the strength of their beliefs, or even to temporarily avoid having to make potentially-distressing determinations about unresolved religious beliefs (see Chapter 6), on the other hand, the welcoming context the sample found in Portugal may also have provided the conditions to positively reappraise beliefs

about the (host) community. Major Chapter 7 findings evidenced the co-existence of positive, negative, and ambivalent meanings-made of trauma, which are expected to concurrently contribute to negative and positive psychological outcomes, and the decisive role host communities can play in promoting adaptive adjustment, namely different dimensions of posttraumatic growth (e.g., greater appreciation for life, new possibilities, and new self).

Discussion of Findings and Major Implications

The following section discusses the findings and major implications of the present dissertation, and makes suggestions for future studies.

Is refugee trauma in the eye of the beholder? How does one reconcile traditional conceptualizations of (refugee) trauma with subjectively-perceived psychological trauma?

Significant advances have been made in the contemporary literature towards a more comprehensive understanding of the refugee experience that goes beyond premigration trauma to define the refugee experience, and perceives postmigration stressors as additional sources of distress (Heeren et al., 2014; Porter & Haslam, 2005; Silove et al., 2017). Our results align with this comprehensive view of the refugee experience but go further, and make contributions to both the refugee trauma literature and to the evidence-base in support of cognitive worldviews perspectives of PTSD, in a number of ways. First, as shown in Chapter 4, there was significant prevalence of extreme trauma events in our sample, including torture. This was surprising given that the majority of the sample was composed of individuals on student visas, and therefore not legally refugees, despite their refugee life experiences. This finding has important implications for practice in host countries and aligns with persistent calls for the need to screen individuals from refugee source countries for history of trauma and torture, to ensure access to specialized care regardless of immigration status (Crosby et al., 2006; Ostergaard et al., 2020). Second, by taking a comprehensive approach to the refugee experience and using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, we found that both wartime stressors (e.g., restricted access to basic needs and services or loss of socioeceonomic status) and postmigration daily stressors (e.g., forced separation from loved ones or the ongoing war), despite not meeting the *Diagnostic and Statistical*

Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.) threshold for definition of trauma (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013), were *subjectively* perceived as violating assumptions of security, identity, control, or idealized future, and therefore constituted sources of significant distress. Third, and reversely, extreme, *objectively* traumatizing war events were recounted by some participants as being, to some extent, congruent with their expectations and, hence, not traumatizing (Boals, 2018; Larsen & Pacella, 2016). In such cases, preparedness for war (i.e., expectation that Syria would eventually be afflicted by war), hope for meaningful sociopolitical changes, and the promise of continuity beyond life on Earth constituted important protective factors against meaning violations. These findings suggest that event centrality, that is, the extent to which a stressor is perceived as threatening to one's identity or a turning point in one's life narrative (Bernsten & Rubin, 2007) and, to that end, able to challenge higher- order or superordinate global meanings, may be more useful than using objective definitions of trauma to determine what is likely to be traumatic to someone. This finding has important implications for research and practice and continues to add to an ecological overview of the refugee experience.

What aspects of prewar Global Meaning are central to Syrians' appraisal of the war and forced displacement?

The task of comprehensively categorizing the content of Syrian refugees' global meaning systems presented not only as virtually insurmountable but, most importantly, likely ineffectual. Given the complexity of individuals' global meaning systems and the exploratory nature of this work, a more effective approach focused on eliciting the aspects of prewar global meaning that were most relevant for participants to interpret their experiences (Park, 2010). Because meaning-related constructs are both complex to operationalize and inherently subjective, we used Park and colleagues' (2016) proposed structure of beliefs and goals to prompt participants in their reflections. Participants' narratives ended up being articulated in reference to the cognitive structures that were most severely challenged, namely regarding concepts of community, continuity, controllability, safety, and justice.

Our results indicate eight key aspects of Syrians' global meaning systems relating to: global beliefs about (a) identity, (b) justice, (c) control and agency, and (d) religion; and global goals that pertained to (e) sense of normality, (f) expectations of peace and safety, (g) intact family and community, and (h) life in the home country.

Because the Syrian war shattered community ties and challenged beliefs about country and community, it was not surprising that (a) beliefs about collective identity became central appraisal lenses (Kira et al., 2019). Group identities were anchored on religion, community, and culture (i.e., for the most part, being Muslim, Syrian, and Arab), which structured prewar daily lives, practices, rituals, and aspirations, and were additionally shaped by internal and regional politics and discourse. Beliefs about (b) justice and (c) control and agency were also expectedly salient. If on the one hand, religion, culture, and history informed layered concepts of justice, on the other hand control and agency appeared to be more prone to violation, given the war's ability to rob individuals of any sense of predictability about their lives and to reinforce feelings of helpless. The last set of beliefs pertained to (d) Islam as a core cognitive structure, permeating all aspects of Syrians' lives and providing crucial pathways to interpret suffering, as demonstrated in Chapter 6.

Life goals are posited to serve as important sources of meaning and therefore prone to disruption in the aftermath of trauma (Park, 2008; Stein et al., 2009). Very little research has directly investigated goal violations as determinants of posttraumatic adjustment, despite recent evidence pointing to its importance, namely in the case of losses that cannot be undone (Steger et al., 2015; ter Heide et al., 2017). Given the uprootedness of the refugee experience, we expected goal violations to be particularly distressing. As such, participants articulated their prewar life goals as assumed states, that included (e) living "normal" lives – a similar phrasing to that of other war-exposed refugee communities (e.g., Soussou et al., 2008) –, (f) in safety and in peace, (g) with family and community intact (i.e., not having to be forcibly separated from loved ones), and the expectation of being able to (h) "complete" their lives in Syria. These assumptions were brutally shattered by the war.

These findings contribute to a virtually non-existent body of empirical literature that, rather than solely assessing posttraumatic appraisals, contributes to an integrated understanding of meaning-making processes by exploring the cognitive structures most prone to violation by specific types of events.

Are Situational Appraisals and Meaning Violations useful constructs for understanding psychological distress and adjustment in Syrian refugees?

One of the central tenets of the integrated meaning-making model contends that it is the extent of the perceived discrepancy between situational and global meanings that

determines the intensity of psychological distress experienced by trauma survivors (Park, 2010). However, empirical research and operationalization of these constructs is still in its early stages, in particular as applied to non-Western populations. As evidenced during protocol testing in Phase 1, and subsequently confirmed during Phase 2 individual interviews, the concept of holding core beliefs and life goals that can be shattered (i.e., meaning violation) by events appraised as cognitively-discrepant (i.e., situational meaning) appears to reflect Syrians' understanding of their experiences.

a. Situational Meaning

Situational meanings, in addition to essentially being (a) intrinsic processes (George & Park, 2016) were also (b) relationally-built namely through – not always fruitful (e.g., contentious summer school in Portugal to discuss Syria's future) – discussions with others. They were also (c) non-stagnant and therefore susceptible to being revisited with new traumas or traumatic reoccurrences of the same event, new information (e.g., learning of a corrupt regime), time (e.g., gradual changes to initial appraisals), and context (e.g., resettlement in a peaceful country). At the time of data collection, individuals had created narratives, which were adaptive to different extents, to explain a war that essentially remained too overwhelming to be integrated, but which Syrians needed to accept as part of their collective history. Situational appraisals of the war as a test from God, caused by humans, part of cyclical generational violence, or a big countries' game allowed participants to somewhat preserve core cognitive structures. This finding aligns with theoretical propositions that individuals are more likely to change situational appraisals rather than global meaning in response to psychologically overwhelming events (Janoff-Bulman, 1989; Park & Folkman, 1997), as well as with empirical studies on the role of acceptance of war and dependence on God's plan in the context of involuntary displacement to reiterate pre-trauma beliefs (Skalisky et al., 2020).

Given the dynamic, evolving nature of both meaning-making and the refugee experience, there is an expectation that war and forced mass displacement will continue to be reappraised in the medium- to long-term, especially given the intergenerational nature of war trauma (Hussain & Bushan, 2011; Kelmendi et al., 2020). In our sample, these situational reappraisals may be particularly salient given the expectation that student-refugees will keep developing a critical consciousness and will be empowered, through education, to play active roles in the future of their communities (Crea, 2016). Theoretically, it is expected that individuals will progressively adopt more benign, less

distressing views of the war and other PTEs (Park & Blumber, 2002). This proposition, however, needs to be empirically confirmed, especially given that the war will continue to be narratively shaped and integrated into collective memory over generations (Kelmendi et al., 2020; Welzer, 2010). We thus contend that situational meaning is not only useful but also an especially important construct to understand psychological adjustment in refugees, which merits continued investigation through mixed-methods longitudinal designs, as a construct in its own right.

b. Meaning Violations

The construct meaning violations entails the shattering of preexisting cognitive structures, that is, a sudden and violent disintegration of those structures. There were two major findings that attest not only to the relevance of this construct for understanding posttraumatic distress and positive adjustment in refugees, but also to the need to continue its empirical investigation in order to further inform theoretical models. The first refers to meaning violations as a gradual process and not simply the result of sudden, catastrophic shattering, since individuals also reported the progressive erosion of global meanings. This gradual process may be the result of cumulative, multi-incidence exposure that has the potential to deplete specific cognitions in refugees, but it also suggests an association between progressively discrepant situational (re)appraisals and the ensuing disintegration of global meanings. These suggestions should be empirically investigated in future studies, in particular as applied to refugees and other survivors of complex trauma to understand the degree of disruption necessary to initiate meaning-making and further inform theoretical models.

The second major finding relates to the coexistence of both negative and positive meaning discrepancies. Because we used a list of global meanings (i.e., the GMVS-ArabV), some participants were able to articulate the extent of the discrepancy as a measure of benefit (e.g., by adding "+" signs to the global goals or beliefs where the discrepancy was perceived as positive; see Chapter 5). Given the complexity of individuals' meaning systems, it is not surprising that a psychologically-threatening event can have concurrent positive and negative cognitive changes. One way to think about it is that, because violations are cognitive-specific, one would not expect a single traumatic event to concurrently and simultaneously violate *all* global meanings. It is therefore possible that meaning violations (i.e., negative meaning discrepancies) likely occur at higher-order cognitions for the event to be perceived as distressing or traumatic (Tedeschi

& Calhoun, 2004), while lower-order meanings remain unchanged and/or the discrepancy is positive, thus suggesting overlapping rather than mutually-exclusive processes. This finding aligns with early theoretical suggestions that specific cognitions are expected to functionally overlap and serve different functions simultaneously (Taylor, 1983), and questions the value of studying particular cognitive structures in isolation, which risks providing incomplete pictures of psychological adjustment processes. Additionally, given that positive and negative changes are not mutually exclusive (see meanings-made in Chapters 6 and 7), future research should investigate how positive discrepancies may impact, or be impacted by, ensuing meaning-making processes.

What are the key determinants of search for meaning in the aftermath of refugee trauma?

According to Park (2010), the core determinants of search for meaning are (1) discrepant appraisals between the event and preexisting meaning and (2) the intensity of the ensuing distress. However, little is known about how a specific search is initiated or what that search entails.

In our research, participants retold complex, reoccurring and overlapping searchs (see Chapters 6 and 7). These searches entailed both (a) automatic and deliberate, (b) intra- and interpersonal, (c) immediate and delayed processes that were aimed at (d) finding comprehensibility and/or significance.

Cognitively-discrepant events triggered (a) automatic searches through "why" questions (e.g., why is this happening?, why me?, why my family?, why us?) that largely focused on matters of justice and on the need to make causal attributions and determine the extent of the threat. Such attributional searches prompted by "why" questions have been consistently documented in the trauma literature across a broad spectrum of cultural traditions or types of trauma, including, for example, ethnically-diverse survivors of intimate partner violence in the US (Lim et al., 2015), Christian women in Australia (de Castella & Simmonds, 2013), Swedish and South Korean cancer patients (Ahmadi et al., 2017), Jewish settler survivors of forced relocation (Tuval-Mashiach & Dekel, 2014), or US college students (e.g., Michael & Snyder, 2005 or Stein et al., 2009), which helps attest to the universality of meaning-making experiences across different populations. Automatic, unconscious processes coexisted with deliberate attempts aimed at changing situational and/or global meanings by striving to: integrate the war and fragmentation of

country and community into a coherent narrative; reappraise shattered life goals; examine one's faith and religious identity; and find purpose in suffering.

Search processes, further to being (b) intrapersonal were also interpersonal. This relational aspect of meaning construction is especially important in the context of community-impacting disasters as individuals attempted to build shared narratives that allowed them to focus on immediate needs despite the chaos around them. Some such examples included perceiving the war as inevitable or even accepting the possibility of death. This type of overaccommodation and acceptance of violence as normative, although temporarily adaptive, is likely to negatively impact psychological adjustment outcomes in the long-run, should such negative cognitions be sustained. Because meaning-making of collective trauma is expected to be reconstructed across time and generations and framed within the community's sociocultural customs and values (Kelmendi et al., 2020; Mollica et al., 2015; Puvimanasinghe et al., 2014), it will be important to monitor how different Syrian communities, both exiled and in-country, will integrate these massively disruptive events into their collective history and identity.

Over the course of the war and subsequent migration, searches for meaning were (c) immediately and uncounsciously triggered by particularly distressing events, cumulative exposure, or even minor contextual stressors that exacerbated the extent of threat and traumatic reactions. Searches were also routinely delayed as refugees attended to more pressing needs and left higher-order shattered cognitions to be resolved at a later time. This experience of having "no time to think," "to grieve," "to feel pain," "to heal wounds" (Feldmann et al., 2007; Goodman, 2004; Hebani et al., 2009), or, as one study participant put it, "to ask [himself] why" (see Chapter 7) is common among war and other refugee experience survivors, and effectively delayed cognitive processing of shattered meanings in our sample. Lastly, refugees' searches were imbued with a need to find both (d) comprehensibility and significance, that is, making sense of, and finding benefit and worth in their experiences, not necessarily as sequential processes as proposed by some scholars (e.g., Janoff-Bulman & Frantz, 1997), but rather as interchangeable, concurrent processes, prone to being revisited, according to refugees' emotional and cognitive needs.

In addition to the distress associated with negative situational appraisals, as proposed by Park (2010), our findings thus suggest a number of other potentially important determinants of search for meaning at different points in refugees' journeys. These determinants include: exposure to additional PTEs; availability of cognitive

resources to engage in meaning-making of higher-order global meanings; stage of displacement, where resettlement is expected to provide important opportunities for meaning-making; social support and ability to include others' perspectives in the construal of meaning (see Chapter 7); coping strategies that may facilitate or impede search processes (see Chapter 6); and, lastly, developmental age, which may have been particularly salient in our sample, who lived through war during their formative years, which raised substantial identity questions (e.g., "Am I this way because of war?; see Chapter 7). These and other potential determinants, such as personality traits, culture, gender, transgenerational processing, time since the trauma (Fivush et al., 2017; Kelmendi et al., 2020; Mollica et al.), which were not immediately apparent in our study, merit continued investigation with other refugee samples.

How do meanings-made contribute to posttraumatic psychological adjustment?

To answer this question, we will first propose a revised definition of meanings-made that builds on Park's (2010) work and will then analyze Syrians' reappraisals of beliefs and goals, sense of purpose, and psychological adjustment, both positive and negative, as an outcome of meaning-making journeys.

a. Conceptual definition of meanings-made

Meanings-made has been conceptualized as encompassing the plethora of results from meaning-making processes, including changed situational and global meanings, and perceived changes in psychological functioning, including perceived growth and positive life changes (see Park, 2010, for a review). However, our results suggest that the former – reappraised meanings (i.e., outputs) – and the latter – perceived changes in psychological functioning (i.e., outcomes) – contribute differently to posttraumatic adjustment: outputs or lessons-learned of meaning-making *inform* adjustment, whereas emotional states or feelings associated with perceived changes in psychological functioning, whether positive or negative, are *indicators* of adjustment. Therefore, we propose that the breath of mental health responses to meaning-making, from distress to growth, are excluded the meanings-made of trauma and analyzed separately.

b. Meanings-made of refugee trauma: Reappraised beliefs and goals

Syrians' meaning-making journeys, incisively designated "psychological travels" by one participant (see Chapter 6), of such diverse, complex, and enduring meaning-

defying events, had at the time of data collection resulted in a number of negative, positive, ambivalent, and unresolved meanings.

Given that participants had endorsed significant violations of beliefs related to controllability, predictability, community, justice, and God's benevolence, and of goals pertaining to an idealized future in their home country, narratives about reappraisals largely focused on those shattered meanings. Negative meanings-made, either sustained since wartime or negatively appraised in Portugal, included: learned uncertainty about the future; learned hopelessness and helplessness; lost sense of belonging; lost faith and trust; shattered sense of community; and lost future in Syria. These negative beliefs and goals were distressing to different degrees and largely co-existed with positive reappraisals. Such positive reappraisals included: learned self-reliance, as a way to regain mastery and control over one's life; increased trust in people; changed identity (e.g., atheist, activist; scholar); increased spirituality and/or religiosity; and goals related to building a new life in Portugal and/or Europe, and essentially transferring pre-war goals about education, career, family, etc., from Syria to Portugal. This latter aspect is particularly important as it speaks to the universality of a construct (global goals) that has taken second stage to core beliefs in psychological adjustment theories, and therefore has been insufficiently studied (Park et al., 2017). The assumption that global goals, as life aspirations, are informed by both contextual factors and cultural expectations (Emmons, 2003; Rahman, 2006) was confirmed by our findings, however, much remains unknown about how individuals develop those goals, namely those related to peace, security and prosperity.

Ambivalent reappraisals appeared to derive from the integration of refugees' lived experiences into complex worldviews about safety, benevolence, God, or justice (e.g., "['Is the world fair?'] 'It's like you're asking me if the world is black or white. I can't answer that question. It's a really wide range of colors!'"; see Chapter 7). If sustained, these layered and more flexible meaning systems may provide refugees with an increased ability to withstand future violations and therefore be protective against distress (Cheng et al., 2014). Lastly, there were shattered meanings that, at the time of data collection, that remained unamenable to being resolved. These included a lost collective self, which robbed Syrians of a core part of their identity and effectively hindered their ability to reconstruct an integrated narrative of the war, and a loss of faith in God. Given that eight years had passed since the onset of trauma, it is possible that these unresolved meanings

result from a combination of extended, unsuccessful searches for meaning with avoidance coping strategies, which are expected to sustain negative outcomes (Wright et al., 2007).

c. Meanings-made of refugee trauma: Reappraised purpose

This category of meanings-made pertains to the element of meaning-making that has long proven hardest to operationalize due to its subjective nature (King & Hicks, 2021; Park & George, 2013): a sense of having meaning or purpose in life and being connected to something greater than oneself (Park et al., 2017). There were three important findings related to sense of purpose. It was apparent from our sample that (1) individuals not only possess different-order purposes, but that (2) these subjective purposes appeared to be anchored on specific beliefs and goals, as posited by Park (2010). Our results also surprisingly suggested that (3) both positive and negative appraisals of shattered meanings informed individuals' sense of purpose. As such, there were student-refugees for whom the loss of collective identity provided the motivation to focus on their studies as a stepping-stone to one day help rebuild their country and heal Syrian communities; parents who lived for their children; other refugees whose purpose was informed by the opportunity, often laden with guilt, to study in Portugal, and thus focused on proving themselves worthy of such circumstances by being the best version of themselves; and others yet whose new identities informed a strong sense of activism. There were also a small number of severely distressed individuals, whose sole, basic strivings were survival or restoration of their basic humanity (i.e., self-healing), which are common experiences among refugee populations at different points in their journeys (McElroy et al., 2010; Mollica et al., 2015; Pulriventi & Mason, 2011). In our study, however, we were able to uncover some of the negative appraisals that appeared to inform those individuals' sense of purpose, including sustained negative beliefs about safety, predictability, and controllability.

d. Did Syrian refugees successfully make meaning of their past and adjust to trauma?

To answer this question, we first need to define what successful meaning-making and successful psychological adjustment mean. Meaning-making is successfully achieved when trauma survivors "reduce perceived discrepancies between appraised and global meanings and restore a sense that the world is meaningful and one's life is worthwhile"

(Park, 2016a, p. 1236), whereas we consider successful psychological adjustment to entail a return to pre-trauma levels of psychological functioning.

Since the beginning of the Syrian war, numerous empirical studies have documented the mental health outcomes of forcibly-displaced Syrian civilians, focusing either on indicators of psychological distress, such as prolonged grief, anxiety, depression, or PTSD (e.g., Kakaje et al., 2021 or Renner et al., 2021) or, less frequently, on positive psychological adjustment, including PTG (e.g., Şimşir et al., 2021). This strategy, which is often the result of constraining publication guidelines, fails to capture the complexity and diversity of positive and negative changes within the same sample of trauma survivors. As the trauma literature has shifted away from an exclusive focus on the negative sequelae of trauma towards exploring the breath of positive changes that result from struggling with psychologically-threatening experiences, there is an emerging perspective that recognizes the coexistence of both positive and negative outcomes (Kelmendi et al., 2020; Kira et al., 2019), and rejects an either/or approach as insufficient and inaccurate (Barrington & Shakespeare-Finch, 2013). By examining Syrians' integrated meaning-making trajectories, our work makes an important contribution to the emerging literature.

Our results suggest that individuals were able to positively reappraise certain shattered cognitions to different extents and, as such, expected to have reduced the distress associated with those discrepancies. The extent to which those positively reappraised meanings are central to an individual's identity, core beliefs, or goals may then determine the degree to which psychological adjustment is successful or if it exceeds the threshold of pretraumatic functioning. That is, we hypothesize that, in survivors of complex trauma, successful meaning-making of shattered higher-order meanings might lead to greater positive adjustment than if meaning is made of shattered lower-order cognitions. This proposition needs to be empirically investigated using mixed-methods designs to capture how positive and negative outcomes interact. Additionally, the same way negative cognitions (e.g., learned uncertainty about the future) are expected to sustain posttraumatic psychological distress (Bernardi et al., 2019), so would positive reappraisals be expected to maintain psychological well-being in the aftermath of trauma. If on the one hand, conditions should be given for refugees to positively reappraise the negative cognitions that are sustaining distress, on the other hand, as they work towards those higher-order abstract goals, refugees should be assisted in designing pathways to

achieve those goals through lower-level, attainable activities (Rasmussen et al., 2006) that incorporate collective and cultural perspectives (Jobson, 2009).

Lastly, mental health outcomes in our sample reflected the complexity of individuals' experiences and ranged from clinically-significant PTSD to perceptions of positive changes that included the main domains of Tedeschi and Calhoun's (2004) posttraumatic growth model. The diversity in posttraumatic outcomes is not surprising given the cumulative nature of refugee trauma and the diversity of stressors, meaning violations, searches for meaning, and meaning-made, as well as the duration of exposure to stressful life circumstances. Thus, albeit refugees did successfully make meaning and achieve psychological adjustment to the point of perceiving growth, those results are cognitive-specific and coexist with unsuccessful processes and outcomes.

Is the meaning-making model useful for understanding posttraumatic adjustment in refugees? How should the field move forward?

Park's (2010) meaning-making model provides a comprehensive explanatory framework of posttraumatic cognitive processing, the basic tenets of which might be universally applicable. Regardless of the complexity of trauma in refugee populations, the model provides an organizational structure of constructs and suggests pathways of cognitive processing that are exceptionally useful to guide researchers in the investigation of trauma recovery processes in survivors of complex trauma. Figure 4 includes the integrated meaning-making model applied to Syrian refugees.

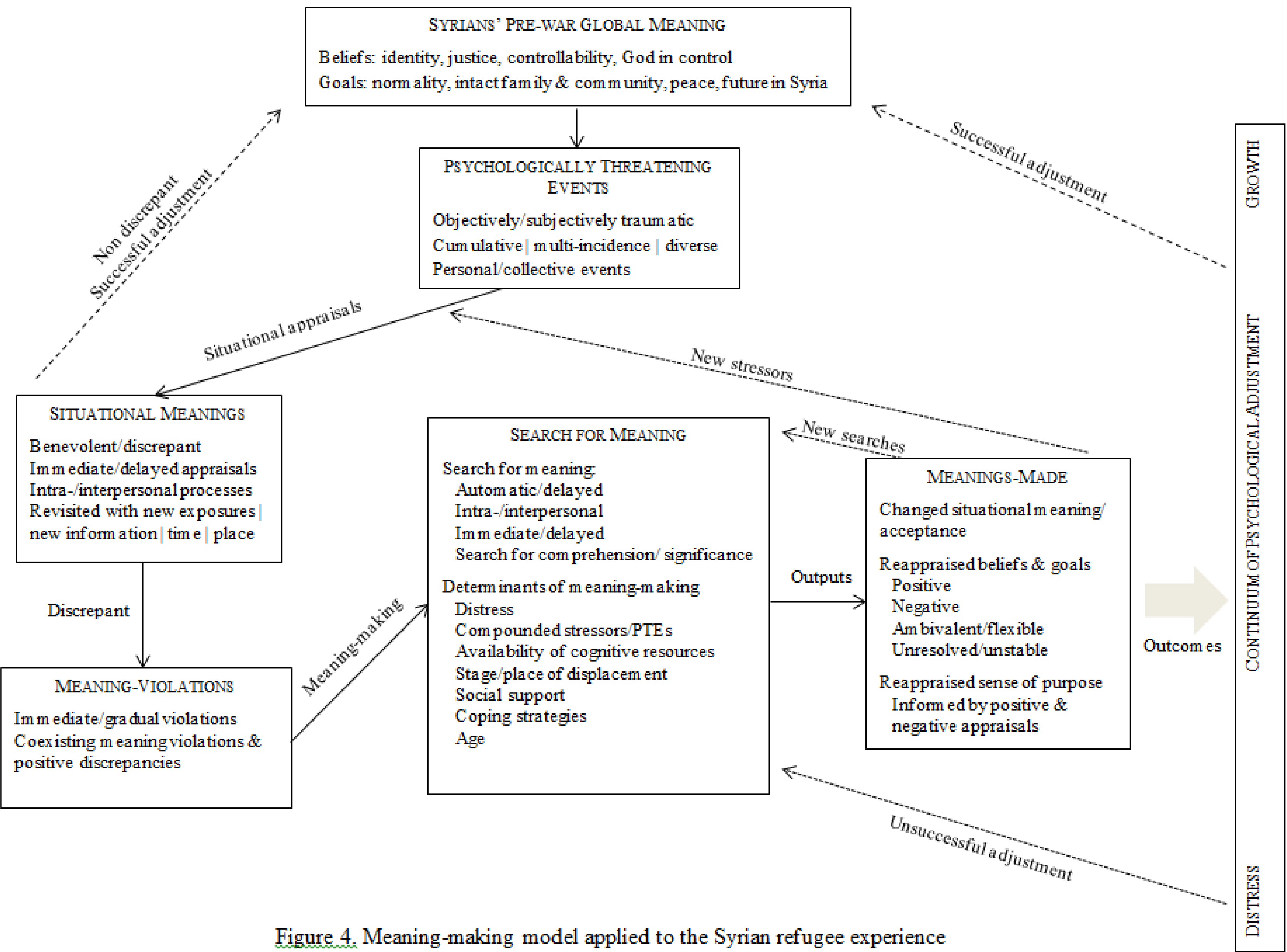

Figure 4. Meaning-making model applied to the Syrian refugee experience

In their 2012 work, Steger and Park expanded the meaning-making model by suggesting four trajectories of meaning-making: resilient, when there is no meaning violation and which often reflects sufficiently flexible global meanings; chronic, when, over time, individuals make meaning that reduces perceived discrepancies; recovered, when meaning discrepancies are adaptively resolved, and which they posit to be the trajectory most likely to lead to perceptions of PTG; and, lastly, delayed, when meanings-made are temporarily adaptive but unsustainable over time, and thus lead to a resurgence of distress.

Recent studies with survivors of collective violence and forced migration have offered perspectives on meaning-making as dynamic trajectories, prone to being revisited across generations, and leading to concurrent positive and negative outcomes (e.g., Kelmendi et al., 2020) which suggests that psychological adjustment is a continuous process with no defined end. Our research contributes to this emerging literature and provides empirical support for meaning-making as a set of overlapping – rather than mutually-exclusive – trajectories or journeys or "psychological travels." Given the cumulative and prolonged nature of refugee trauma and the fact that the same traumatic event does not equally violate all meaning structures, one would expect meaning-making trajectories of different shattered cognitions to co-occur. Yet, how these co-occurring processes inform one another and impact overall psychological outcomes remains unknown.

Furthermore, all meanings-made, including those resulting from recovered and resilient trajectories, are subject to being revisited with new stressors, new information, age, place, etc., and, most importantly, across time and generations (Fivush et al., 2017; Hussain & Bushan, 2011; Riedel, 2014). This finding has two major theoretical implications. The first pertains to meaning-making of refugee trauma as a virtually endless process, open to continual reappraisals in order to meet personal and contextual demands, and challenges notions of completed or recovered trajectories. The second implication refers to psychological adjustment to refugee trauma as a continuum of mental health outcomes, where significant distress (i.e., negative adjustment) can co-exist with significant psychological wellbeing (i.e., positive adjustment). Because refugees are unlikely to adaptively and sustainably resolve *all* meaning violations, it is possible that successful meaning-making of higher-order meanings results in greater overall positive

adjustment, than if successful meaning is made of lower-order meanings while the former remain unresolved.

Given the complexity of processes and outcomes, studies that provide integrated perspectives and employ longitudinal designs and different refugee samples, will be crucial to further contribute to the rich theoretical models.

Limitations

There are several challenges to conducting research with severely traumatized, hard-to-reach populations, such as refugees, that limit the interpretation of our findings. The sample was small and largely composed of beneficiaries of higher education programs for refugees (i.e., "the [lucky] other one percent;" UNHCR, 2016), and therefore their experiences may not be representative of those of other Syrian refugees. Although this is a limitation derived from nonrandom sampling, it provided important insight into the experiences of a segment of the refugee population that is largely understudied. The fact that the sample was highly educated was advantageous in terms of participants' abilities to reflect on their experiences and give in-depth accounts of complex meaning-making processes, and is expected to have contributed to the richness of meaning-making outcomes. In studies with refugee populations, higher levels of education have been found to both be protective against (Crea, 2016; Priebe et al., 2009; Raghavan et al., 2013), and contribute to, negative mental health outcomes (Porter and Haslam, 2005; Sonne et al., 2016), which, given our findings, points to the importance of examining psychological adjustment to trauma through an integrated lens that can capture the complexity of cognitive processes and outcomes.

Data were self-reported, assessed retrospectively eight years after the onset of the war, when a significant number of participants were in their teen years, and the study was cross-sectional and did not assess cognitive processing over time. Given that catastrophic events are unexpected, retrospective assessment is an often necessary approach (Park et al., 2016). It is possible that accounts were influenced by recent events rather than representing an accurate depiction of participant experiences and outcomes. This limitation around self-reported mental health outcomes, in particular perceptions of growth, has been much debated, as researchers attempt to understand if growth corresponds to true changes or instead to positive illusions about the impact of trauma (e.g., Dursun et al., 2013; Kurian et al., 2016). In our study, we used the Harvard Trauma Questionnaire – Arabic version (Shoeb et al., 2007) to assess PTSD, but opted not to use

the Hopkins Symptom Checklist – Arabic version (Mahfoud et al., 2013) to measure depression and anxiety, or the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996), which would have to be cross-culturally adapted, as an indicator of positive adjustment. Complementing the assessment of mental health outcomes with these measures would have provided a more comprehensive picture of psychological adjustment in the sample by complementing qualitative findings. Nonetheless, this trade-off was strategic and took into account: the exploratory nature of the study, which required an emphasis on qualitative methodology; the need for cross-cultural adaptation of instruments, which was time- and resource-consuming; and a preoccupation not to overburden participants. Participant recruitment for Phase 1 FGs was exceptionally hard, as evidenced in Chapter 3, which resulted in a bare minimum number of participants for those sessions. Findings from those group sessions would likely have been much richer and possibly inform further adjustments to the research protocol had the number of participants met the intended targets. Notwithstanding the fact that FGs are expected to provide culturally-appropriate opportunities for vulnerable populations to share their experiences (Halcomb et al., 2007), given the fragmentation of the Syrian community, hesitancy to adhere to FGs was understandable.

There were also several limitations regarding language. Because the study required assessing the applicability of a Western theoretical model to Arabic-speaking refugees, we took great steps to gather a multidisciplinary Expert Committee to ensure appropriate outreach strategies, anticipate potential problems, preliminarily test adequacy of language and models, translate and adapt study materials, and essentially work to maximize benefit and minimize harm to potential participants (Seagle et al., 2020). Despite all these steps, Phase 2 data collection was conducted in English or Portuguese to accommodate the target populations' preference for speaking directly with the researcher, which, although important to empower refugees as research participants, may have precluded individuals from fully and accurately express the nuances of their meaning-making processes.

Because we did not use measures of positive adjustment (e.g., Posttraumatic Growth Inventory), the extent of perceived improved psychological functioning remains unknown. On the same token, applying measures of depression and anxiety, in addition to PTSD, would have provided a more complete picture of distress, and, thus, of the breath of psychological responses. Finally, we only used one psychometric measure of meaning,

the GMVS-ArabV, which provided a good baseline to explore meaning violations, but was insufficient to capture the diversity of Syrians' experiences. If on the one hand further testing of the GMVS-ArabV needs to be done with larger samples of refugee populations, on the other hand, it is possible that measures of meaning may require application by researchers or clinicians with room to explore abstract constructs as needed, to ensure adequate assessment of individual experiences.

Despite these limitations, we are confident that our findings make important contributions to the evidence-base on meaning-making and psychological adjustment to trauma, to the refugee trauma literature, and to the field of cross-cultural psychology.

Conclusion

The empirical work on meaning-making with refugee populations is still in its embryonic stages. The diversity and cumulative nature of trauma, complexity of individual global meanings, exposure to personal and collective events, culture, coping strategies, or availability of emotional and cognitive resources to process the breath of their experiences make the task of investigating refugees' posttraumatic cognitive processing virtually insurmountable. And yet, necessary. In the face of the complexity of processes and mental health responses in refugees, the meaning-making model provided an invaluable framework that was amenable to accommodating the contributions of empirical findings. Moving forward, researchers, regardless of the population, ought to adopt integrated approaches to psychological adjustment to trauma that consider the possibility of cognitive-specific, concomitant meaning-making trajectories, and that employ both longitudinal designs and mixed-methods. It was clear in our research that refugees are prone to revisit meanings-made throughout their migration trajectories are expected to continue to do so across time and generations. These findings challenged concepts of recovered meaning-making trajectories and successful psychological adjustment and end-states, which has significant implications for theory, practice, and policy.

If on the one hand, these concepts may require theoretical reframing to accommodate the experiences of survivors of collective trauma, on the other hand, clinicians should integrate these dynamic perspectives into their clinical practice. It is important that the latter consider not only exposure to trauma and other sources of psychological distress, but also the sociopolitical context of the individual, which is

expected to influence treatment outcomes. Given the level of experiences injustices, practitioners working with refugee populations may be called to advocate for and alongside their clients, thereby helping to repair some of the cognitive structures most severely shattered by refugee trauma.

Resettlement provides unique opportunities to restore meaning and promote adaptive adjustment. Considering the centrality of the community to Syrian identity, host countries should promote pathways to integration and healing that promote safe opportunities for shared narrative building, not only between Syrian communities, but also between host and refugee communities that restore sense of belonging.

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9

Appendices: Research Protocol

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Information to Participants

JOURNEYS IN MEANING: Psychological adjustment in resettled refugees

Phase 1: Focus Groups

Introduction

The research study *JOURNEYS IN MEANING: Psychological adjustment in resettled refugees* is a project led by Lisa Matos, funded by the Foundation for Science and Technology (SFRH/BD/129602/2017), and hosted by the William James Center for Research, ISPA-Instituto Universitário.

The purpose of the study is to understand how refugees recover from trauma in resettlement, namely how refugees make meaning of the experiences that led them to leave their countries of origin and how, despite significant trauma and loss, they are able to achieve psychological adjustment. Results of the study will be published in national and international scientific encounters and journals and will serve to inform public policies to promote successful integration of refugee populations.

Description of the study and study procedures

In Phase 1 of the study, we will conduct Focus Groups interviews with Syrian refugees living in Portugal for at least 6 months.

Focus Groups are small group discussions (between 4-8 participants), facilitated by a moderator, that give participants an opportunity to speak about their experiences. They are a common research method of approaching health topics with refugee populations.

Focus Groups will have a total duration of approximately 2 hours. Participants will first be asked to individually fill-out a brief socio-demographic questionnaire and a questionnaire to document exposure to pre-migration trauma events and symptoms. This will be followed by a group discussion where participants will be encouraged to reflect on their views of the world before the war and at present time. Each participant will then fill-out a short questionnaire to evaluate how those worldviews may have changed. At the end, participants will be asked to share impressions and offer suggestions about of the issues discussed.

Focus Group interviews will be conducted by Lisa Matos, in English or Portuguese, with the assistance of a note-taker and an Arabic-language interpreter. The Focus Group will be audio recorded. At the beginning of the group, we will discuss group ground rules, namely that information shared within the group shall not be discussed outside.

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FCT Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia

Research team

The study is conducted by Lisa Matos, who has extensive field experience working with refugee populations, both in the United States and Portugal. The research team includes doctoral research advisors Isabel Leal, PhD (WJCR, ISPA, Lisbon, PT), Crystal Park, PhD (University of Connecticut, CT, USA) and Monica Indart, PsyD (Rutgers University, NJ, USA). As needed, interactions with prospective participants will be mediated by research assistants with Arabic language skills.

Participants' rights

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You can choose not to answer certain questions and end your participation at any time without any risk or consequences.

Confidentiality

All the information you provide will be carefully handled with respect to confidentiality. All the information collected will be coded and you will remain completely anonymous. Each participant will be assigned a numerical code and only this code (rather than your name, for example) will be used to identify you across all data collected. Audio recordings will be transcribed following the Focus Group and the original file will be subsequently destroyed. Data collection, processing and analysis will be handled in compliance with the European Union General Data Protection Regulation (EU 2016/679).

Risks

Reflecting on the events that led you to leave your country and how those impacted your current life can be upsetting. We respect and understand this. If needed, we will refer you to follow-up support services in your community.

Benefits

Your participation is crucial to help us, as receiving communities, to adjust and improve our integration strategies according to the needs of your community. Without your strength, courage, and above all, without your voice, we are not able to understand the needs and work to promote yours and your community long-term integration.

You will not benefit directly from participating in the study, although study participants often report that being able to speak and feeling heard improves their wellbeing. Also, as a small token of our appreciation, we will offer each participant a €10 SONAE gift card at the end of the group discussion.

Contact information:

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ISPA WJCR WILLIAM JAMES CENTER FOR RESEARCH
FCT Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia

Information to Participants

JOURNEYS IN MEANING: Psychological adjustment in resettled refugees
Phase 2: Individual Interviews

Introduction

The research study *JOURNEYS IN MEANING: Psychological adjustment in resettled refugees* is a project led by Lisa Matos, funded by the Foundation for Science and Technology (SFRH/BD/129602/2017), and hosted by the William James Center for Research, ISPA-Instituto Universitário.

The purpose of the study is to understand how refugees recover from trauma in resettlement, namely how refugees make meaning of the experiences that led them to leave their countries of origin and how, despite significant trauma and loss, they are able to achieve psychological adjustment. Results of the study will be published in national and international scientific encounters and journals and will serve to inform public policies to promote successful integration of refugee populations.

Description of the study and study procedures

In Phase 2, we will conduct individual interviews with Syrian nationals living in Portugal for at least 6 months, including refugees, asylum-seekers, or others, regardless of legal status.

The individual interview has a total duration of 90 minutes and will be conducted in English or Portuguese by the lead researcher, Lisa Matos. If needed or preferred, an Arabic-language interpreter can be present during the interview to assist with language interpretation.

The participant will first be asked to fill-out a brief socio-demographic questionnaire and a questionnaire to document exposure to pre-migration trauma events and symptoms. This will be followed by a 30-40 minute conversation where the participant participants will be encouraged to reflect on their views of the world before the war and at present time. At the end, the participant will fill-out a short questionnaire to evaluate how those worldviews may have changed.

With the participant's permission, the interview will be audio recorded.

Research team

The study is conducted by Lisa Matos, who has extensive field experience working with refugee populations, both in the United States and Portugal. The research team includes doctoral research advisors Isabel Leal, PhD (WJCR, ISPA, Lisbon, PT), Crystal Park, PhD (University of Connecticut, CT, USA) and Monica Indart, PsyD (Rutgers University, NJ, USA). As needed, interactions with prospective participants will be mediated by research assistants with Arabic language skills.

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Risks

Reflecting on the events that led you to leave your country and how those impacted your current life can be upsetting. We respect and understand this. If needed, we will refer you to follow-up support services in your community.

Benefits

Your participation is crucial to help us, as receiving communities, to adjust and improve our integration strategies according to the needs of your community. Without your strength, courage, and above all, without your voice, we are not able to understand the needs and work to promote yours and your community long-term integration.

You will not benefit directly from participating in the study, although study participants often report that being able to speak and feeling heard improves their wellbeing. Also, as a small token of our appreciation, we will offer each participant a €10 SONAE gift card at the end of the interview.

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ISPA WJCR WILLIAM JAMES CENTER FOR RESEARCH
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JOURNEYS IN MEANING: Psychological adjustment in resettled refugees

Phase 1: Focus Groups

Consent Form

By my signature below I declare that:

I understand the purpose of my participation in Phase 1 (Focus Groups) of the research study *JOURNEYS IN MEANING: Psychological adjustment in resettled refugees*, a project led by Lisa Matos, funded by the Foundation for Science and Technology (SFRH/BD/129602/2017), and hosted by the William James Center for Research, ISPA, as it was explained to me in a language that I understand;

I understand that my participation is voluntary and I can choose not to answer certain questions and end my participation at any time without any risk or consequences;

I understand that the Focus Group research team includes a moderator (Lisa Matos), a language interpreter and a note-taker, all of whom are bound by confidentiality agreements;

I understand that the information shared in the Focus Group should not be discussed outside of the group.

I understand that I will remain anonymous throughout the study and that all data collected will be kept confidential.

I further declare that any questions or concerns I had about my participation in the study were adequately answered and clarified by the research team.

________________________________ __________

Participant´s initials or signature Date

Contact information:
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File Nº: _______

ISPA WJCR WILLIAM JAMES CENTER FOR RESEARCH
FCT Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia

JOURNEYS IN MEANING: Psychological adjustment in resettled refugees

Phase 2: Individual Interviews

Consent Form

By my signature below I declare that:

I understand the purpose of my participation in Phase 2 (Individual Interviews) of the research study *JOURNEYS IN MEANING: Psychological adjustment in resettled refugees*, a project led by Lisa Matos, funded by the Foundation for Science and Technology (SFRH/BD/129602/2017), and hosted by the William James Center for Research, ISPA, as it was explained to me in a language that I understand;

I understand that my participation is voluntary and I can choose not to answer certain questions and end my participation at any time without any risk or consequences;

I understand that any and all members of the research team, including the researcher (Lisa Matos), any language interpreters, and research assistants, are bound by confidentiality agreements;

I understand that I will remain anonymous throughout the study and that all data collected will be kept confidential.

I further declare that any questions or concerns I had about my participation in the study were adequately answered and clarified by the research team.

____________________________________ ____________

Participant´s initials or signature Date

Contact information:
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File Nº: _______

File Nº: _______ Date: ___________________
Researcher: _________________________

SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

1. Gender: ☐ Man ☐ Woman ☐ Other: ____________
2. Age: ______
3. Country of origin: _____________________
4. Marital status:

   ☐ Single ☐ Married/Partnered ☐ Divorced

   ☐ Widowed ☐ Other: ____________
5. Ethnic group: ____
6. Religion:

   ☐ Islam Branch of Islam: ___________________

   ☐ Christianity Branch of Christianity: ___________________

   ☐ Druze ☐ Yazidi ☐ Other: ___________________

   ☐ Not religious/Not applicable: ___________________________

   a. Do you regularly attend religious services (e.g., mosque/church/other place of cult)? ☐ Yes ☐ No

7. What is your highest level of education?

   ☐ No formal education ☐ Primary School (4th Grade)

   ☐ Middle School (6th Grade) ☐ Middle School (9th Grade)

   ☐ Secondary School/High school (12th Grade)

   Higher education:

   ☐ Associate Degree Field of studies: ______________________________

   ☐ Bachelor's Degree Field of studies: ______________________________

   ☐ Master's Degree Field of studies: ______________________________

   ☐ Doctoral Degree Field of studies: ______________________________

8. What was your occupation/profession in country of origin?

   ____

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File Nº: _______ Date: ___________________
Researcher: _________________________

TRAVEL FROM YOUR COUNTRY OF ORIGIN TO PORTUGAL

9. When did you leave your country of origin?
   Month: ___________________ Year: _________

10. When did you arrive in Portugal?
   Month: ___________________ Year: _________

11. Did you travel with other family members?
   ☐ Yes ☐ No
   a. If yes, who travelled with you? ____

12. After leaving your country of origin and before arriving in Portugal, did you stay in another transit country for more than 1 month?
   ☐ Yes ☐ No
   If yes, which country/countries and for how long (*check all that apply*)?
   ☐ Jordan How long? ___________________________
   ☐ Turkey How long? ___________________________
   ☐ Lebanon How long? ___________________________
   ☐ Egypt How long? ___________________________
   ☐ Libya How long? ___________________________
   ☐ Greece How long? ___________________________
   ☐ Italy How long? ___________________________
   ☐ Another European country: __________________________________ How long? ___________________
   ☐ Other countries: ____ How long? ___________________

13. During your journey since leaving your country of origin:
   Did you fear for your life? ☐ Yes ☐ No
   a. Were you or others traveling with you THREATENED with violence?
      ☐ Yes ☐ No
      If yes, who threatened you (e.g. police, neighbors, etc.)? ____

   b. Were you or others traveling with you VICTIMS of violence?
      ☐ Yes ☐ No
      If yes, who committed violence against you or others? ____

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File Nº: _______ Date: ____________________
Researcher: __________________________

LIFE IN PORTUGAL

14. When you arrived in Portugal, what was your legal status?

☐ Refugee ☐ Asylum-seeker
☐ Humanitarian protection ☐ Student visa
☐ Other visa Type of visa: ____
☐ Undocumented
☐ Other: ____

15. What is your current legal status in Portugal?

☐ Refugee ☐ Asylum-seeker
☐ Humanitarian protection ☐ Student visa
☐ Other visa Type of visa: ____
☐ Expired visa Type of visa: ____
☐ Undocumented
☐ Portuguese residency (*Autorização de Residência*)
☐ Portuguese nationality
☐ Other: ____

16. Since arriving in Portugal, did you leave and stay in another European country for more than 1 month?
   a. ☐ Yes ☐ No
   b. If yes, where and for how long? ____

17. Do you have any family living in Portugal? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If yes, who?
☐ Spouse/Partner ☐ Children How many: ___ Age: _________________________________
☐ Parents ☐ Siblings ☐ Other family members: ____

18. Are you currently employed? ☐ Yes ☐ No
   a. If yes, what is your current occupation? ____
   b. How many days a week? ____
   c. How long have you been working at your current job? ____

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استبيان هارڤارد للإصابات و أعراض الشدة

HARVARD TRAUMA QUESTIONNAIRE

File Nº: ________________ Date: ____________

Researcher: ______________________ Research Assistant: _________________

إرشادات:

نود أن نسألك عن تاريخك قبل القدوم إلى البرتغال والأعراض الحالية. يحتوي الاستبيان على ثلاثة أقسام (الحوادث المؤلمة| أعراض الشدة | تاريخ التعرض للتعذيب) ويتضمن الأسئلة التي تعكس الأحداث والأعراض التي يواجهها الآخرون أحيانًا في مجتمعاتك. هذه المعلومات سرية للغاية وسوف يتم استخدامها لمساعدتنا على تخطيط المداخلات التي تعزز صحة شاملة أفضل للاجئين مثلك.

قد تجد بعض الأسئلة مزعجة. إذا كان الأمر كذلك، من فضلك لك مطلق الحرية في عدم الإجابة. اطمئن هذا لن يؤثر على قدرتك على المشاركة في الدراسة.

Instructions:
We would like to ask you about your history before coming to Portugal and present symptoms. The questionnaire has 3 sections (Trauma Events | Trauma Symptoms | Torture History) and includes questions that reflect events and symptoms sometimes experienced by others in your communities. This information is strictly confidential and will be used to help us design interventions that promote better overall health for refugees like yourself.
You may find some questions upsetting. If so, please feel free not to answer. This will not affect your ability to participate in the study.

الجزء الأول: الحوادث المؤلمة
PART 1: TRAUMA EVENTS

نرجو أن تذكر إن كنت قد تعرضت لأي من الحوادث التالية (ضع علامة (√) في العمود المناسب تحت "نعم" أو "لا").

Please indicate whether you have experienced any of the following events (check "YES" or "NO" for each column).

		نعم /Yes	لا/No
١/1	هل تعرضت للاضطهاد بسبب عرقك، دينك أو مذهبك *Oppressed because of ethnicity, religion, or sect*		
٢/2	هل تم تفتيش دارك بحضورك بحثاً عن أشخاص أو أشياء *Present while someone searched for people or things in your home.*		
٣/3	هل فتشت أنت *Searched*		
٤/4	هل تم نهب ممتلكاتك الشخصية أو مصادرتها أو تدميرها *Property looted, confiscated, or destroyed*		
٥/5	هل فرض عليك ترك مدينتك و السكن في منطقة أخرى تقل فيها الخدمات *Forced to leave your hometown and settle in a different part of the country with minimal services*		
٦/6	هل سجنت *Imprisoned*		
٧/7	هل عانيت من عدم امكانية الحصول على الرعاية الطبية أو الدواء خلال مرضك *Suffered ill health without access to medical care or medicine*		

		YES	NO
٨/8	هل عانيت من عدم وجود الطعام أو الماء الصافي *Suffered from lack of food or clean water*		
٩/9	هل إضطررت على الهرب من وطنك *Forced to flee your country*		
١٠/10	هل فرضت عليك الهجرة من وطنك بناءاً على أصل أجدادك، دينك أو مذهبك *Expelled from country based on ancestral origin, religion, or sect*		
١١/11	هل لم يكن لديك مأوى *Lacked shelter*		
١٢/12	هل شاهدت انتهاك حرمة أو تدميرالعتبات المقدسة أو المراكزالتعليمية الخاصة بدينك أو مذهبك *Witnessed the desecration or destruction of religious shrines or places of religious instruction*		
١٣/13	هل شاهدت اعتقال أو تعذيب أو اعدام شخصيات مهمة من عشيرتك، دينك أو طائفتك *Witnessed the arrest, torture, or execution of religious leaders or important members of tribe*		
١٤/14	هل شاهدت إعداماً جماعياً للمدنيين *Witnessed mass execution of civilians*		
١٥/15	هل شاهدت قصف أو إحراق أو تدمير الأماكن السكنية أو الأهوار *Witnessed shelling, burning, or razing of residential areas or marshlands*		
١٦/16	هل شاهدت هجمات كيميائية على المناطق السكنية أو الأهوار *Witnessed chemical attacks on residential areas or marshlands*		
١٧/١٧	هل تعرضت لميدان الحرب (انفجارات، قصف مدفعي، رمي الأسلحة) أو الألغام *Exposed to combat situation (explosions, artillery fire, shelling) or landmine.*		
١٨/١٨	هل أصبت إصابة جسمية خطيرة بسبب التعرض لميدان الحرب والألغام *Serious physical injury from combat situation or landmine*		
١٩/١٩	هل اسُتخدمت كدرع بشري *Used as a human shield*		
٢٠/20	هل أصيب أحد أ فراد عائلتك أو أصدقائك إصابة جسمية خطيرة بسبب التعرض لجو الحرب أو الألغام *Serious physical injury of family member or friend from combat situation or landmine*		
٢١/21	هل شاهدت جثثاً متعفنة *Witnessed rotting corpses*		
٢٢/22	هل أجبرت على البقاء في الدار بسبب الفوضى والعنف في الخارج *Confined to home because of chaos and violence outside*		
٢٣/23	هل شاهدت شخصاً ما يتعرض للأذى الجسمي (الضرب، الطعن،...إلخ) *Witnessed someone being physically harmed (beating, knifing, etc.)*		
٢٤/24	هل شاهدت عملية الإساءة الجنسية أو الاغتصاب *Witnessed sexual abuse or rape*		
٢٥/25	هل شاهدت حالة تعذيب *Witnessed torture*		
٢٦/26	هل شاهدت حالة قتل *Witnessed murder*		

		YES	NO
٢٧/27	هل أجبرت على الإخبارعن شخص آخر مما عرّضه لخطر الإصابة أو الموت *Forced to inform on someone placing them at risk of injury or death*		
٢٨/28	هل أجبرت على تدمير ممتلكات شخص آخر *Forced to destroy someone's property*		
٢٩/29	هل أجبرت على إلحاق الأذى الجسمي (الضرب، الطعن،...إلخ) بشخص ما *Forced to physically harm someone (beating, knifing, etc.)*		
٣٠/30	هل قتل أحد من أفراد عائلتك (طفلك، زوجك،...الخ) أومات نتيجة العنف *Murder or violent death of family member (child, spouse, etc.)*		
٣١/31	هل قتل صديقك أومات نتيجة العنف *Murder or violent death of friend*		
٣٢/32	هل أجبرت على دفع قيمة الطلقة المستخدمة لقتل أحد أفراد عائلتك (طفلك، زوجك،...الخ) *Forced to pay for bullet used to kill family member (child, spouse, etc.)*		
٣٣/33	استلمت جثة أحد أفراد عائلتك (طفلك، زوجك،...الخ)، ومنعت من البكاء و إقامة مراسيم هل الدفن عليه *Received the body of a family member(child, spouse, etc.) and prohibited from mourning them and performing burial rites*		
٣٤/3٤	هل اختفى أحد أفراد عائلتك (طفلك، زوجك،...إلخ) *Disappearance of a family member (child, spouse, etc.)*		
٣٥/3٥	هل اختفى صديقك *Disappearance of a friend*		
٣٦/3٦	هل اُختطف أحد أفراد عائلتك (طفلك، زوجك،...إلخ) أو أخذ كرهينة *family member (child, spouse, etc.) kidnapped or taken as a hostage*		
٣٧/3٧	هل اُختطف صديقك أو أخذ كرهينة *friend kidnapped or taken as a hostage*		
٣٨/38	هل بلّغ أحدٌعنك مما عرضك و عائلتك لخطر الإصابة أو الموت *Someone informed on you placing you and your family at risk of injury or death.*		
٣٩/39	هل تعرّضت للأذى الجسمي (الضرب، الطعن،...إلخ) *Physically harmed (beaten, knifed, etc.)*		
٤٠/40	هل إختطفت أو أخذت كرهينة *Kidnapped or taken as a hostage*		
٤١/41	هل تعرضت للإساءة الجنسية أو اغتصبت *Sexually abused or raped (i.e., forced sexula activity)*		
٤٢/42	تم تعذيبك (بمعنى أثناء وجودك في الأسر تعرضت إلى المعاناة النفسية أو الجسدية بشكل متعمد ومنتظم) *Tortured (i.e., while in captivity you received deliberate and systematic infliction of physical and/or mental suffering)*		
٤٣/43	نرجو أن تحدد أي مواقف أخرى مخيفة أو شعرت عندها بأن حياتك معرضة للخطر *Please specify any other situation that was very frightening or in which you felt your life was in danger:*		

الجزء الرابع: أعراض الشد ة

PART IV: TRAUMA SYMPTOMS

إن الأعراض التالية هي أعراض يشعر بها أحيانا الأشخاص الذين تعرضوا لحوادث مؤلمة أو مفزعة في حياتهم.

الرجاء قراءة كل بند بدقة، وتحديد مدى معاناتك من هذه الأعراض خلال الأسبوع المنصرم.

The following are symptoms that people sometimes have after experiencing hurtful or terrifying events in their lives. Please read each one carefully and decide how much the symptoms bothered you in the past week.

		(١/1) لا أبدا *Not at all*	(٢/2) قليلا *A little*	(٣/3) إلى حد كثير *Quite a bit*	(٤/4) بشدّة *Extremely*
١/1	**هل تعاودك الذكريات والأفكار لأكثر الحوادث ألما أو فزعا** *Recurrent thoughts or memories of the most hurtful or terrifying events*				
٢/2	**هل تشعر و كأنك تعيش الحادثة مرة أخرى** *Feeling as though the event is happening again*				
٣/3	**هل تأتيك كوابيس (أحلام مخيفة) متكررة** *Recurrent nightmares*				
٤/4	**هل تشعر بالانفصال أو الانعزال عن الناس** *Feeling detached or withdrawn from people*				
٥/5	**هل تجد نفسك غير قادر على الإحساس بالعواطف** *Unable to feel emotions*				
٦/6	**هل تجد نفسك سريع الجفلان أو الاستثارة** *Feeling jumpy, easily startled*				
٧/7	**هل تجد صعوبة في تركيز أفكارك** *Difficulty concentrating*				
٨/8	**هل تجد صعوبة في النوم** *Trouble sleeping*				
٩/9	**هل تجد نفسك متوجسا أو على حذر** *Feeling on guard*				
١٠/10	**هل تجد نفسك سريع الانفعال أو تنتابك سورات من الغضب** *Feeling irritable or having outbursts of anger*				
١١/11	**هل تتجنب الأعمال التي تذكرّك بالحادثة المؤلمة** *Avoiding activities that remind you of the hurtful event*				
١٢/12	**هل تجد نفسك غير قادرعلى تذكر بعض الحوادث التي سببت لك أشد الألم** *Inability to remember parts of the most hurtful events*				
١٣/13	**هل تجد نفسك أقل اهتماما بالأعمال اليومية** *Less interest in daily activities*				

		1. not at all	*2. a little*	*3. quite a bit*	*4. extremely*
١٤/ **14**	**هل تشعر وكأنه لا مستقبل لك** *Feeling as if you don't have a future*				
١٥/ **15**	**هل تتجنب الأفكار أو المشاعر المرتبطة بالحوادث المؤلمة** *Avoiding thoughts or feelings associated with the hurtful events*				
١٦/ **16**	**هل تشعر برد فعل جسمي أوعاطفي عند تذكيرك بالحوادث المؤلمة** *Sudden emotional or physical reaction when reminded of the most hurtful events*				
١٧/ **1٧**	**هل تشعر بضعف الذاكرة** *Poor memory*				
١٨/ **1٨**	**هل تشعر بالأنهاك أو التعب الشديد** *Feeling exhausted*				
١٩/ **1٩**	**هل تعاني من آلام أو مشاكل جسمية** *Troubled by bodily pain or physical problems*				
٢٠/ **20**	**هل تشعر أن مهاراتك الآن هي اقل مما كانت سابقاً** *Feeling that you have less skills than you did before.*				
٢١/ **21**	**هل تجد صعوبة في الانتباه** *Difficulty paying attention*				
٢٢/ **22**	**هل تجد نفسك غير قادرعلى اتخاذ أي قرار في حياتك اليومية** *Feeling unable to make daily plans*				
٢٣/ **23**	**هل تجد صعوبة في مواجهة المواقف الجديدة** *Having difficulty dealing with new situations*				
٢٤/ **24**	**هل تشعر أنك الشخص الوحيد الذي عانى من هذه الحوادث** *Feeling that you are the only one who suffered these events*				
٢٥/ **25**	**هل تشعر أن الآخرين غير قادرين على فهم ما جرى لك** *Feeling that others don't understand what happened to you*				
٢٦/ **26**	**هل تشعر بالذنب لأنك نجوت و ما زلت على قيد الحياة** *Feeling guilty for having survived*				
٢٧/ **27**	**هل تلوم نفسك لما حدث** *Blaming yourself for things that have happened*				
٢٨/ **28**	**هل تتساءل لماذا قدّر الله لك أن تواجه مثل هذه الحوادث** *Spending time thinking why God is making you go through such events*				
٢٩/ **29**	**هل تشعر بالحاجة إلى الانتقام** *Feeling a need for revenge*				
٣٠/ **30**	**هل تشعر أن الآخرين عدائيون تجاهك** *Feeling others are hostile to you*				
٣١/ **31**	**هل تشعر أن الشخص الذي وثقت به قد خانك** *Feeling that someone you trusted betrayed you*				
٣٢/ **32**	**هل تشعر بعدم الثقة بالآخرين** *Feeling no trust in others*				
٣٣/ **33**	**هل تشعر أن ليس هناك من أحد تعتمد عليه إلا الله** F*eeling that you have no one to rely upon but god*				

		1. not at all	*2. a little*	*3. quite a bit*	*4. extremely*
٣٤/ 3٤	**هل فقدت الأمل** *Hopelessness*				
٣٥/ 3٥	**هل تشعر أنك عاجزعن مساعدة الآخرين** *Feeling powerless to help others*				
٣٦/ 3٦	**هل تشعر بالعار بسبب الحوادث المؤلمة التي تعرضت لها** *Feeling ashamed of the hurtful or traumatic events that have happened to you*				
٣٧/ 3٧	**هل تشعر بالأهانة بسبب ما جرى لك** *Feeling humiliated by your experience*				
٣٨/ 3٨	**هل تشعر أنك تجلب السو على نفسك أ و عائلك** *Feeling that you are a jinx to yourself and your family*				
٣٩/ 3٩	**هل اكتشفت بنفسك أو أخبرك أحد أنك قمت بعمل لا تستطيع أن تتذكره** *Finding out or being told by other people that you have done something that you can't remember*				
٤٠/ 40	**هل تشعر أنك انقسمت إلى شخصين، وأن أحدهما يراقب ما يفعله الآخر** *Feeling as though you are split into two people and one of you is watching what the other is doing*				
٤١/ 4١	**هل أنت ضايج** *Dayeg'(ruminations, poor concentration, lack of initiative, boredom, sleep problems, tiredness, and somatic complaints)*				
٤٢/ 4٢	**هل قلبك مقبوض** *Qalbak maqboud (sensation of the heart being squeezed)*				
٤٣/ 4٣	**هل أنت عصبي** *Asabi(irritability, nervousness, lack of patience, and anger outbursts)*				
٤٤/ 4٤	**هل تشعر بضيق النفس وكأنك على وشك الاختناق** *Nafsak deeyega and makhnouk (feeling of tightness in the chest and a choking sensation)*				
٤٥/ 4٥	**هل نفسيتك تعبانة** *Nafseetak ta'bana (tired soul)*				

تاريخ التعرض للتعذيب

TORTURE HISTORY

نرجو أن تذكر إن كنت قد تعرضت لأي من الحوادث التالية التي يعتبرها كثير من الناس "تعذيباً" (ضع علامة (√) في العمود المناسب تحت "نعم" أو "لا").

Please indicate whether you have experienced any of the following events that many people consider torture (check "YES" or "NO" for each column).

		نعم /*Yes*	لا/*No*
١/1	هل أجبرت على كتابة إعترافات مزّيفة أو غير حقيقية *Forced to write false confessions*		
٢/2	هل تعرضت للإهانة والتهديد *Humiliated and threatened*		
٣/3	هل وضعت عصابة على وجهك لتغطية عينيك *Blindfolded*		
٤/4	هل أجبرت على الوقوف لمدة طويلة من الزمن *Forced to stand for long periods of time*		
٥/5	هل قيّدت بالحبال أو بسلاسل حديدية *Chained or tied*		
٦/6	هل وضعت في گونية، صندوق أو مكان ضيق جداً *Placed in a sack, box, or very small place*		
٧/7	هل وضعت في سجن انفرادي بدون أي ملابس، مرحاض أو تهوية *Placed in an isolation cell with no clothes, toilet, or ventilation*		
٨/8	هل حرمت من النوم *Deprived of sleep*		
٩/9	هل تعرضت لأصوات صارخة ومستمرة *Exposed to continuous and piercing noise*		
١٠/10	هل تعرضت للحرارة الشديدة أو الشمس المحرقة أو الضوء القوي *Exposed to strong heat, sun, or light*		
١١/11	هل تعرضت للمطر أو البرد *Exposed to rain or cold*		
١٢/12	هل حرمت من الطعام و الماء لمدة طويلة *Deprived of food and water for long periods of time*		
١٣/13	هل تعرضت لظروف غير صحية/قذرة أدت إلى مرضك *Exposed to dirty conditions leading to ill health*		
١٤/14	هل منعت من قضاء حاجتك *Prevented from urinating or defecating*		
١٥/15	هل حرمت من الرعاية الطبية *Deprived of medical care*		

		YES	NO
١٦/16	هل منعت من الوضوء و أداء الصلاة *Prohibited from ablution and prayer*		
١٧/1٧	هل أجبرت على أداء أعمال شاقة *Forced labor*		
١٨/1٨	هل علّقت من اليدين والرجلين بقضيب لفترات طويلة من الزمن *Suspended from a rod by hands and feet for long periods of time*		
١٩/1٩	هل مددت على مصطبة التعذيب لفترات طويلة من الزمن *Stretched on a rack for long periods of time*		
٢٠/20	هل لكمت أو صفعت أو ركلت أو ضربت بأدوات صلبة (الرجاء تحديد مناطق الضرب: الرأس، الجذع، الظهر، الأعضاء التناسلية،...إلخ) *Punched, slapped, kicked, or stricken with objects (please specify targeted areas: head, torso, back, genitalia, etc.)*		
٢١/21	هل ضربت على باطن القدمين بالعصي أو السياط (فلقة) *Beaten on soles of feet with rods or whips (Falanga)*		
٢٢/22	هل تم تغطيس رأسك في الماء حتى كدت تغرق *Head submerged in water with near drowning*		
٢٣/23	هل حرقت بأعقاب السجائر أو القضيب المسخن كهربائياً أو الزيت الحار أو النار أو الأحماض الكيميائية/تيزاب (الرجاء تحديد المناطق التي تعرضت لذلك: اليدين ، الجذع ، الظهر، الأعضاء التناسلية،...إلخ) *Burned by cigarettes, electrically heated rods, hot oil, fire, or corrosive acid/"tizab" (please specify targeted areas: hands, torso, back, genitalia, etc.)*		
٢٤/24	هل صعقت كهربائياً (الرجاء تحديد المناطق التي تعرضت لذلك: اليدين ، الجذع ، الظهر، الأعضاء التناسلية،...إلخ) *Electrocuted (please specify targeted areas: hands, torso, back, genitalia, etc.)*		
٢٥/25	هل تم انتزاع أظافر يديك/قدميك أو أسنانك بعنف و شدّة *Fingernails, toenails, or teeth forcefully extracted*		
٢٦/26	هل تم وصم جبهتك بعلامة (×) *Forehead branded with an* (×)		
٢٧/27	هل تم بتر أجزاء من جسمك (الأذنين، الأنف، اللسان، اليدين، الثديين، الأطراف، الأعضاء التناسلية..إلخ) *Body parts mutilated (ears, nose, tongue, hands, breasts, limbs, genitalia, etc.)*		
٢٨/28	هل تعرضت إلى موقف الإعدام و تبين فيما بعد أنه كان تمثيلا *Subjected to mock executions*		
٢٩/29	هل أجبرت على التعري أمام الآخرين *Forced to undress in front of people*		
٣٠/30	هل أجبرت على اتخاذ أوضاع مذلة بما فيها الأوضاع الجنسية *Forcibly arranged in various humiliating or sexually explicit positions*		
٣١/31	في حالة الأجابة على (٣١) بنعم، هل تم تصويرك فوتوغرافياً؟ *If YES to (31), were you photographed?*		
٣٢/32	هل شاهدت الإساءة الجنسية، الاغتصاب أوعملية التعذيب لشخص آخر *Witnessed the sexual abuse, rape (i.e., forced sexual activity), or torture of someone*		
٣٣/33	هل أجبرت على المشاركة في عمليات الإساءة الجنسية، الاغتصاب أو التعذيب لشخص آخر *Forced to participate in the sexual abuse, rape, or torture of someone*		
٣٤/3٤	هل تعرضت للإساءة الجنسية أو اغتصبت *Sexually abused or raped (i.e., forced sexual activity)*		

٣٥/35	**نرجو أن تشير إلى أي مواقف أخرى من التعذيب:** *Please specify any other torture situations:*

File Nº: ____________________ Date: ____________

Researcher: ___________________________ Global Meaning Violations Scale

مقياس الإنتهاك المعنى العالمي

Global Meaning Violations Scale

عندما تفكر كيف شعرت قبل وبعد الأحداث التي أدت بك إلى مغادرة بلدك:

When you think how you felt before and after the events that led you to leave your country:

[Most disrupting event:____]

5\٥ بشدة Very Much	4\٤ كثيرا A lot	3\٣ متوسط Moderately	2\٢ قليلا Slightly	1\١ لا أبداً Not at all	
					١. إلى أي مدى وقوع هذه الأحداث ينتهك إحساسك بأن العالم منصف أو عادل؟ 1. How much have these events changed your sense of the world being fair or just?
					٢. إلى أي مدى تنتهك هذه الأحداث إحساسك بأن هناك قوى أخرى تسيطر على العالم؟ 2. How much have these events changed your sense that other forces have control in the world?
					٣. إلى أي مدى تنتهك هذه الأحداث إحساسك بأن الله هو المسيطر؟ 3. How much have these events changed your sense that God is in control?
					٤. إلى أي مدى تنتهك هذه الأحداث إحساسك بالسيطرة على حياتك؟ 4. How much have these events changed your sense of being in control of your life?
					٥.إلى أي مدى تنتهك هذه الأحداث إحساسك بأن العالم مكان جيد وآمن؟ 5. How much have these events changed your sense that the world is a good and safe place?

File Nº: ____________________ Date: ____________

Researcher: ___________________________ Global Meaning Violations Scale

إلى أي مدى تؤثر الأحداث التي أدت إلى مغادرة بلدك في قدرتك على إنجاز كل من هذه الأمور:

How much have these events interfered with your ability to accomplish each of these:

5\٥ بشدة Very Much	4\٤ كثيرا A lot	3\٣ متوسط Moderately	2\٢ قليلا Slightly	1\١ لا أبداً Not at all	
					٦. الدعم الإجتماعي والمجتمع 6. Social support and community
					٧. قبول الذات 7. Self-acceptance
					٨. الصحة الجسدية 8. Physical health
					٩. السلام الداخلي 9. Inner peace
					١٠. التحصيل العلمي 10. Educational achievement
					١١. الإنجاز في مهنتي 11. Achievement in my career
					١٢. الإنجاز الإبداعي أو الفني 12. Creative or artistic accomplishment
					١٣. العلاقة الحميمة (التقارب العاطفي) 13. Intimacy (emotional closeness)

ISPA WJCR WILLIAM JAMES CENTER FOR RESEARCH
FCT Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia

JOURNEYS IN MEANING: Psychological adjustment in resettled refugees

Interview Guide

[Introduction to the constructs of global beliefs (i.e., worldviews/thoughts about how the world should function or who is in control), global goals (i.e., what we want for ourselves and for our lives), and sense of purpose or meaning (i.e., what we live for/keeps us hopeful)]

1. Can you tell me the main reason why decided to leave Syria?

When you think about your life before the war,

2. Can you describe your beliefs or views of the world?
   [Probes regarding specific beliefs, as needed. For example: was the world fair? Safe? How was your relationship with God?]

3. What expectations/aspirations/goals did you have for your life then?
   [Probes regarding specific goals, as needed. For example: what did you want to do career-wise? Did you dream of having a family? Children?]

4. Can you remember what gave your life purpose back in Syria? What was life about back then?
   [Probes: what made you feel excited about your day/the future?]

Now that you are in Portugal,

5. Do you feel that those beliefs/goals/sense of purpose have changed? Can you explain how they changed?

6. What led to those changes? Was there a specific time or event that made you start questioning or thinking repeatedly about what you believed in?

7. Do you feel that those changes in beliefs/goals/sense of purpose or the war/[specific event] have changed you as a person/in some fundamental way? How?

8. How do those changes and events make you feel?

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