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*“You cannot forgive and you cannot forget”: The Serbian refugee settlement experience in Australia*

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### **Abstract**

Currently, there is limited research on the settlement experiences of refugees from the Balkan regions, and in particular Serbia. There is also a need to provide a contextual understanding of the refugee settlement experience. The current study explored the refugee experience of twelve male Serbian refugees (aged 30 to 65), who migrated to Australia following the Yugoslav Civil War (1991-2001). A qualitative, phenomenological methodology explored the experiences of the refugees from their own perspective. Thematic coding of the interview data revealed the two major themes of, settlement, and traumatic experiences, as central to the experiences of this group of refugees. Language difficulties, discrimination, stigmatization of Serbian identity, multiple losses and grief, and failing of the justice system to establish accountability and provide reparation to the victims, were all significant obstacles to successful settlement. Most salient, however, were the experiences of torture and trauma. Participants were still trying to negotiate these memories years after the events. Nevertheless, some participants showed strong resilience and the belief that they became stronger as a consequence of their experiences. We encourage those working with Serbian refugees to help them search for meaning in their stories of trauma.

## **‘You Cannot Forgive and You Cannot Forget’:**

### **The Serbian Refugee Settlement Experience in Australia**

A major challenge faced by many developed countries, particularly in the Western World, is the protection and relocation of refugees. A refugee is defined as a person who is forced to escape and/or has elected to flee from politically, socially, and economically troubled regions around the world (Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC), 2011). Western countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom, and the USA, are particularly attractive options to this disadvantaged and often traumatized group because of the countries’ status as political, economic, and social safe-havens. Refugees generally come from war-affected countries, and in many cases experience trauma, tragedy, and persecution. However, on arriving in a new country, and along with carrying the baggage of psychological and physical effects of traumas experienced in their home country (Murray, Davidson, & Schweitzer, 2008), they are further confronted by serious and often daunting social, cultural, and economic challenges. These challenges are not only associated with settlement and adjustment, but also with the related reconstruction of their identity within new and different social relations, and ways of living. This has direct repercussions not only on the individual’s health, but also on the individual’s sense of settlement and belonging (Hondius, van Willigen, Kleijn, & van der Ploeg, 2000).

Our study focuses specifically on the settlement experiences of Serbian migrants from the Balkans, who entered Australia as refugees as a result of the Yugoslav Civil War of the 1990s. The Serbian community in Australia is composed of migrants who arrived on Australian shores in three distinctive waves. The first wave of Serbian migrants came after the Second World War and comprised ex-servicemen. The second wave of Serbian migrants arrived in the 1970s as skilled workers. The third wave, and the one in which we are most interested arrived in the

1990's and was composed of refugees fleeing from the Yugoslav Civil War. During the Yugoslav Civil War (1991-2001), millions of people were displaced and fled to many parts of the world, including Australia. The disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s resulted in a bloody civil conflict unparalleled in Europe since the Second World War (Halpern, 1993). Referred to as 'ethnic cleansing', it ultimately resulted in the unlawful confinement of thousands of people in detention camps, and in bloodshed and psychological and physical torment. From the beginning of the crisis in Yugoslavia in 1999 to 2001, over 33,000 persons migrated from Serbia, the largest single group of refugees arriving in Australia during the 1990s (Serbian Orthodox Welfare Association [SOWA], 2007).

Although there have been a number of investigations of the experiences of refugees from different ethnic groups (e.g., Bosnian, Yugoslav, Croatian) affected by the Yugoslav Civil War (Colic-Peisker and Walker, 2003; Keel & Drew, 2004), there are few studies specifically exploring the experiences of Serbian refugees. Researchers have often confused Serbian ethnicity with country of origin, further problematizing this limited research. In other studies, Serbian refugees were included under the code 'Former Yugoslavian' (Keel & Drew, 2004). It has been argued that this coding is too broad as there are multiple ethnic identities under this banner (Liebkind, 1992).

Among the few studies exploring settlement experiences of Serbian refugees, King, Welch and Owens (2010) interviewed ten Serbian refugees. They explored the refugee experiences before, during, and after the war, and identified eight stages in the refugee journey. Several factors were found to influence the refugees' adaptations to settlement and included mental health issues arising from war-related trauma, age, language barriers, negative Serbian stereotypes, and social and practical support. Similarly, Colic-Peisker and Walker (2003)

qualitatively explored the settlement experiences of refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina. They reported that of the three acculturation strategies (integration, marginalization, and separation), separation was the most common strategy (Berry, 2013). The integration strategy tended to be adopted by people with high human capital (i.e. high levels of education and or social capital). Most refugees were people with lower human capital, who remained 'loyal' to their ethnic community, and in most cases separated from mainstream Australian society.

The experiences of settlement of refugees from the Yugoslav Civil War share commonalities with people from other cultural groups and nations who also engaged in civil conflict. Refugees in general are often the product of human rights violations including exposure to physical and psychological trauma. As a result, refugees from areas of major conflict often experience associated emotional distress, posttraumatic stress, anxiety and depression, psychosomatic and grief-related disorders, and crises of existential meaning (Copelj et al., 2017; Steel et al., 1999; Schweitzer et al., 2006; Tempany, 2009; Williams & van der Merwe, 2013). For example, Schweitzer, Brough, Vromans, and Asic-Kobe (2011) documented the mental health of 70 newly arrived Burmese refugees in Australia, and reported that a substantial proportion of this group experienced psychological distress, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (9%), anxiety (20%), depression (36%), and symptoms of somatisation (37%). These refugees also experienced a number of pre-migration traumas including serious injury (65%), lack of food or water (74%) and shelter (69%), the effects of exposure to combat (58%), and witnessed incidents of torture (46%), and rape (33%) (Schweitzer et al., 2011). Exacerbating the refugee's severe psychological and physical difficulties and distresses, were difficulties in communication in the host country, along with concerns about family members who were in areas other than in Australia (Schweitzer et. al., 2011). Tamil refugees in Australia also

experienced post migration adaptation difficulties associated with the loss of social and cultural support (Steel et al., 1999). **The importance of justice was also reported. For example, Parmentier and Weitekamp (2013) reported that the vast majority (90%) of Serbian respondents believed that prosecutions of war crimes should take place so that it will not happen again. In order words, these Serbian refugees see war crime prosecutions as essential for establishing lasting peace and security.** Understanding the context of refugee experience helps us understand adjustment difficulties and pathology associated with that experience.

The pathways to pathology vary among highly traumatised refugees. For example, Nickerson et al. (2014) in their investigation of pathology among 248 Iraqi Mandaean adult refugees residing in Sydney, reported complex patterns of symptoms consisting of PTSD and Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD). Refugees from war torn regions are particularly vulnerable to compromised states of mental health. For example, Schweitzer, Melville, Steel, and Lacherez (2006) reported that the extent of trauma experienced directly by Sudanese refugees predicted PTSD, while trauma experienced more broadly by family members predicted levels of depression and anxiety. Compromised mental health continued to be an issue in post-migration, with depression levels among these refugees being positively correlated with length of residency (Schweitzer et al., 2006). Research has also highlighted **intergenerational transmission of trauma and its psychological repercussions as salient for refugees (Mor, 1990; Pender, 2007; Gangi, Talamo, & Ferracuti, 2009).**

In summary, there is a paucity of research specifically exploring the experience of settlement amongst Serbian refugees in Australia. Research to date suggests that this group are more likely to adopt separation acculturation strategies and are vulnerable to distress due to traumatic war experiences.

This research examines prevailing themes of settlement among Serbian refugees who migrated to Australia in the period following the Yugoslav Civil War. In addition, the research focusses on the major challenges associated with settlement and adjustment to a new environment. There is a need for evidence to support the use of culturally specific and appropriate intervention strategies enabling positive settlement experiences for this group. Specifically, the study provides a contextual social-psychological understanding of the settlement experiences of a vulnerable and largely vocally and physically silent refugee group.

## **Method**

### **Methodology**

The methodology is informed by the theoretical orientation of interpretivism. The interpretive phenomenological approach focuses on the lived experience of the participants as they engage in the cultural context of contemporary Australian society. This methodology involves the researcher's active engagement with participants and acknowledges that understanding is constructed within multiple realities (Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor, & Tindall, 1994). **Within the interpretive phenomenological approach, thematic analysis is used to locate the themes related to participant experiences.** Personal accounts are analyzed, and themes are drawn out to develop patterns and relationships of meaning (Banister et al., 1994). The process engages the strategy of reflexivity, with continual self-reflection in order to understand how the researcher's personal assumptions and biases may influence interactions with participants, and interpretation of the data (Willig, 2008). This was particularly important in this study, as the first author identifies as a Serbian refugee, and also as a survivor of torture.

### **Methods**

Upon ethical approval, one to one semi-structured interviews commenced and focussed on four main periods of the participants' lives: (1) pre-war; (2) during the war; (3) migration; and, (4) settlement. The questions revolved around the participants' experiences (e.g. Tell me about your life before the war. Tell me about your life during the war. Tell me about your life during the migration journey. Tell me about your settlement in Australia.). Prompts were also used to stimulate elaboration and rich description. The interviews were conducted in Serbian and recorded using digital audio equipment.

### **Analysis**

The audiotaped interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated into English. The data were then analyzed through a six stage thematic analysis process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Clarke and Braun (2013). The first stage of the thematic analysis involves reading the transcripts and familiarizing yourself with the data. The next stage produced basic initial codes from the data. The third stage of the analysis involved sorting different codes into potential themes. During this stage of analysis some codes formed main themes, others formed sub-themes and some were discarded. Stage four involved reviewing previously established themes. Stage five of the analysis involved defining and naming the themes. Stage six of the analysis constituted the writing of the report. During this writing process, relevant data extracts were used to establish the validity of the analysis. All themes and sub-themes were checked and discussed by the three authors.

### **Participants**

Participants were twelve males of Serbian background who were refugees from the Yugoslav Civil War, 1991-2001. They were sourced through registered Serbian Associations of Camp Inmates from the Yugoslav Civil War, and The Association of Serbian Victims of the

Bosnian Civil War. The participants were purposively chosen on the basis that they were identified as Serbian refugees and lived in the former Yugoslavia during the conflict in the Balkans. Male participants were selected due to them sharing similar experiences and cultural understandings. **Most of the** participants were captured as civilians and imprisoned in camps during the Yugoslav Civil War. Below are four narrative descriptions of the participants, that are representative of the entire group, who were aged between 30 and 65, and who all experienced trauma prior to relocating in Australia (see Table 1). Pseudonyms have been used to protect confidentiality.

Table 1 about here

Jovo<sup>1</sup> is aged 46 years and came to Australia in 1999 as a refugee from Bosnia-Herzegovina. He was imprisoned in the Celebici camp in Herzegovina for three months in 1992. While awaiting exchange he was imprisoned in Sarajevo for ten days. He and his family spent five years as refugees in Serbia prior to arriving in Australia. Jovo is on a disability pension, owns the property in which he and family live, and is married with four children.

Zeljko is a 46 year-old male from Sydney. He came to Australia in 1998 as a refugee from Bosnia and Herzegovina. He was imprisoned in the Celebici camp in Herzegovina in 1992. Zeljko was severely tortured and sustained permanent physical injury. As a result of his injuries, Zeljko is on a disability pension. He lives with his wife and two children.

Miroslav is a 30 year old male living in Geelong, Victoria. He came to Australia in 2001 as a refugee from Bosnia and Herzegovina. At the age of five Miroslav was captured by the Croatian and Bosnian Muslim army and imprisoned in the Celebici and Musala camps for seven

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days where he suffered significant emotional abuse. He is single and lives with his parents who were also both detained in Celebici and Musala Camps.

Sveto is a 50 year-old male from regional Melbourne. He came to Australia in 1999 as a refugee from Bosnia and Herzegovina. While not a detainee himself, his family was detained in the Odzak camp where his brother was killed. He did extensive research into the death of his brother and is still searching for his body. Sveto works as a truck driver and owns the house in which he lives with his wife and son.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Two major themes were identified from the data, Settlement, and the Trauma Experience. As seen in figure 1. Complexity of Traumatic Experiences is further explained by the three subthemes of torture experience (physical and psychological), intergenerational transmission of trauma and violence, and perceived injustice. On the other side Settlement is described chronologically, and a pre-existing model developed by the Centre of Violence and Torture (2002) has been synthesized with the data.

What was most apparent from the interviews was that traumatic past events played an important role in the settlement experiences and the wellbeing of the participants. As such we focus our discussion of findings of this study on the theme of complexity of traumatic experiences, and their relevance for settlement outcomes.

**Figure 1 about here**

#### **The Complexity of Traumatic Experiences**

While it was evident that many of the participants had experienced torture, we believe it is most appropriate to use the term trauma, particularly as all participants experienced traumatic events. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.; DSM-5; American

Psychiatric Association (APA), 2013) expands the definition of trauma to include vicarious exposure as well as direct exposure (APA, DSM-5, p. 271).

The pre-migration experiences of the participants largely centered on their traumatic experience as was related to feelings of injustice and the intergenerational transmission of violence and trauma. The three factors of trauma, injustice, and intergenerational transmission acted as catalysts in a continual cycle which played out in each participant's capacity to settle in Australian society (Figure 2). This process strongly influenced the type of settlement experience in terms of integration, assimilation, marginalization, and or separation (Berry, 2013). These traumatic experiences resulted in a greater likelihood of separation, **a similar finding to Colic-Peisker and Walker (2003).**

**Figure 2 about here**

We will firstly give some accounts of the traumatic experiences (refugee experience as trauma, and torture as trauma) of the participants, before exploring how participants negotiated these experiences.

Unfortunately, refugees often consider their status negatively, 'you have no given name, you have no family name, you only have one name and that is refugee'. (Lazar). For many refugees there is a long transition between leaving their country of origin to their arrival in the new country. This period can be and often is extremely stressful and uncertain:

They took all my property. In one night, they totally destroyed my life. I took a refuge in Serbia...I was in a miserable situation and had no means for my life and I was working for 12 hours a day. I made decision to emigrate. (Yugoslav)

Life in exile often included the painful after-effects of the traumatic experience (van der Veer, 1992):

When I was exchanged and when I joined my family I did not know how to walk on the street. I started seeing a psychiatrist and I received some drugs and injections ... I didn't know how to walk on the street. I constantly thought that the guards were around me and that the guns are aimed at me. I could not sleep at all. God save you from that. I would get up from the bed and go outside without knowing that I was outside. (Draza)

The state of being in exile is distressful and difficult (Fischman, & Ross, 1990):

I have lost my identity and I felt unworthy. Many times I went to the town and I had no money to buy myself a cup of coffee. I had no ID card. I had no driver's licence. I had no birth certificate. I had no identification document. The only document I had was the International Red Cross ID with my name on it, without the picture, and I only had the ID number from Geneva. That's all I had. I had no home keys, no car keys. I was walking totally stripped of anything. When you have nothing then you are nothing. (Lazar)

In the next exert Branko describes his experiences of torture:

I experienced the most extreme torture methods, from psychological to physical maltreatment every day and night. The most difficult thing was psychological torture, isolation from the outside world, not being able to get any true information. (Branko)

During the war, the growth of international opposition and associated political pressures resulted in the development of surreptitious torture techniques which do not carry a physical scar (Basoglou, 1992):

One of the guards showed me a bullet. He asked me 'is this the real bullet?' I said 'yes'. ... He put a bullet into the rifle barrel and cock. He told me 'kneel' and I kneeled. Then he told me 'open your mouth' and I opened my mouth and he shot into my mouth. When he shot I did not know whether I was alive or dead ... They took out the powder

from the bullet and when it was fired it had no power to move the bullet, but the capsule of the bullet would still make an explosion ... there were some people who for half an hour could not get back to consciousness, they fainted. I did not faint, but I wasn't sure if I was dead or alive ... You don't know whether you are going to be killed or not. (Draza)

The methods were cruelly imaginative, extreme and varied:

They put me into the manhole filled with water and forced me under the water. They told me 'you are going to die here motherfucker'. They closed the lid which was hermetic and no oxygen could pass in. I could not reach the bottom of the manhole and I had to hold to the ladder to keep my head above the water. I could not see anything, it was dark inside. Are they going to let you out? You don't know. There is nothing that you can think of in that situation. Fear and panic started. Simply you are there and what can you do? ...

There was a group of prisoners that was put in the manhole for twenty four hours and they were told that they would stay in there until they die. ... They did not have enough air in there and I know the man that cut his veins. He found some sharp piece of metal in there and he cut his veins as he could not endure it any more. (Lazar)

The methods of torture also centred on humiliation and degradation:

I was ... forced to drink urine. We did not have a toilet; it was a canal next to the hangar that we used as a toilet. They would take out twenty prisoners to urinate into that canal. On one occasion the guards forced me to drink that urine. He pressed my head into the canal and forced me to drink the urine... Some prisoners were taken out and forced to eat grass and imitate animals such as cows, horses, sheep. (Draza)

However, despite a greater focus on avoiding obvious physical scars, physical torture was still evident 'they were beating me heavily .... I fainted and they poured water over me and started beating me again' (Draza).

The mass beatings were occasionally fatal:

They killed two people there at the spot ... poor guy who was deaf-mute. He was trying to tell them something and they were beating him with the rifle butts and kicking him.

That is when another old man died from beating. ... There was a guy who could not stand it anymore and tried to escape. They killed him at the spot. (Lazar).

Starvation was used as a method of physical torture and was often coupled with humiliation 'the guards would grab our food and gave it to their dogs' (Branko).

When I went to collect the food one woman urinated into the kettle with the food for prisoners. .... She urinated in the kettle with the food for prisoners. What can you do? I took the food.' (Draza).

**Consequences of torture.** The visible signs of physical torture were often clearly evident:

My eye bone is still damaged and I still have some particles of the bullet in my head.

Many times here in Australia I was referred to go to MRI and I never went because of those metal particles in my head. So in few days they made me an artificial eye. (Jovo)

The psychological repercussions were less obvious but no less pronounced:

People that survived torture can never be healed. Some things can be forgiven, but can never be forgotten, regardless where it happened, in which part of the Earth. You cannot forgive and you cannot forget it ... You have to try to behave normally. You have children and you have to behave normally, but from time to time it gets to you. During

the night when you are sleeping, I call it 'film'. It is like the tape of the movie which is being developed and when it starts developing you cannot sleep all night. I get up, light a cigarette and go out and then I come back again. (Draza)

The reactions to trauma persist long after the damage is done '...scars on my body constantly remind me of the torture with a red-hot knife and I feel psychological pain because somebody destroyed me for nothing. I am traumatised forever. (Zeljko).

These findings are consistent with the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) diagnostic criteria, which is classified under "Trauma and Stressor-Related Disorder" (5th ed.; DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association (APA), 2013). The findings are also consistent with previous research on war affected refugees (Nickerson et al. 2014). **These participant experiences are also similar to the depression and anxiety reported in part studies (Schweitzer et al. 2006; Tempany, 2009).**

Torture is inherently incomprehensible and the inability to make sense of that experience overwhelms the victim's capacity to cope (Basoglu, 1992). Trying to make some sense of being tortured and suffering is nonetheless part of the healing process (Frankl, 1984). This processing is the dominant discourse for the Serbian refugees who were victims of torture and takes the form of questioning and searching for answers:

If something like that happens and then you ask yourself what is my fault, is it my fault that this happened? Why are those people hating me? Are they having some reason to hate me? You have no idea why this is happening. (Miroslav)

Many wish to know and actively seek reasons from the torturers for their inflicting pain and suffering (Valinas, Parmeniter, & Weitekamp, 2009):

I could not understand that somebody can do something like that. We used to live in the system where we could not imagine that somebody could do harm to another person. I could not understand what the reason for this to happen was ... After all that I have survived I sometimes asked myself a question, how is it possible that human mind can do something like that? Are there more people who are capable to do it? (Zeljko)

Further complicating this drive to understand and rationalise the experience of abuse and suffering was the fact that in many instances the perpetrators were known to the victims:

We could not comprehend that they would commit such crimes on us as we had no problems before. I knew a lot of them ... we grew up together, we played together, we spent time together and something like that suddenly changed, that hatred. (Zoran)

The incomprehensibility of being tortured was further complicated by the failure of the legal system to prosecute the perpetrators:

That question, that crime happened then and after that it happened at many different places and it is still happening today. Is it possible for the human race to investigate and answer why and how it comes to that abnormality? (Zeljko)

### **Perceived injustice**

The participants had a strong sense of injustice in that the criminal perpetrators of the crimes against them got away with it. Conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina, as in other conflicts, is characterized by all parties genuinely viewing themselves as victims of injustice (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, & Miall, 2001). In Bosnia and Herzegovina prosecution was used as a means of avoiding further conflict (Valinas, Parmeniter, Weitekamp, 2009), and with it the absence of future war crimes. However, prosecution of war criminals is slow and often understandably tedious:

Who is going to press charges against them? Who is going to sentence them? For example, I know who killed my brother and how can I press charges against him? How can I accuse him? (Sveto)

The injustice and the sense that the legal system failed to persecute the perpetrators of the war crimes was often expressed by Serbian refugees in Australia:

They committed horrible crimes and most likely they will never be brought to justice for the crimes that they committed. Who can take them to the court? Even if Serbia decided to press charges against them somebody would simply say stop and it would stop.

Simply, it is all controlled by great powers. If the truth about the War in Bosnia came out then it would be clear that the Serbs were the victims and that is something that great powers want to avoid as it would influence the global politics and history. Once those people that were tortured are dispersed all around the globe then the evidence would be destroyed and I believe that is the reason why we were given the opportunity to migrate. Simply, you disperse those people around the world and they will keep quiet about what happened. (Sveto)

The perpetrators of the crimes were often protected by the system in which they operated:

Most of those torturers are now employed by government institutions, even by the police... they are high ranking officers ... Who is going to press charges against them? (Zeljko)

The powerless position of the Serbian victims of war and fear to talk about it is still present even twenty years after those events:

Simply you have to be quiet and those that suffered have no power and are marginalised. And even if you press charges how can you find the evidence? Maybe somebody can

testify that they heard about it, but those that witnessed it would never talk about it and if they do they would lose their lives ... That is why people are silent. (Sveto)

The investigation of war crimes in Croatia has been hampered by the reluctance of witnesses to come forward (Human Rights Watch, 2015), a disproportionate number of cases being brought against the ethnic Serb minority, and various other legislative injustices (Human Rights Watch, 2004). Although, it has been two decades since the cessation of the Yugoslav Civil War, the psychological and physical repercussions of the war among the Serbian Refugees are ongoing. **This certainly interferes with the settlement process of those refugees who instead of living in the present are still haunted by the past. It is the constant focus on the past that resulted in poor settlement and separation (Berry, 2013). Similar to past studies their sense of injustice created angst and psychological tension (Parmetier & Weitekamp, 2013).**

### **Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma and Violence**

In many traumatized individuals, unresolved mourning may be organized into a family narrative passed from one generation to the next (Pender, 2007). The effects of war and conflict are intergenerational, and affect the socialization and everyday lives of the refugee 'I have been traumatised and that trauma will be inherited by my offspring. It is normal that my children will know what happened to me. That narrative will be passed from one generation to another. Just like my ancestors passed their history to me' (Zeljko).

This transmission of violence from one generation to the next carries through from the country of origin to the country of settlement:

My son had problems. He was attacked by some Croat and he was fourth or fifth grade and we had to intervene through the teacher. So the children were still affected by hatred that was brought from our damned land. We were all affected by that. (Zoran)

The conflict can then spread its wings across geographic boundaries as ethnic clashes between young Serbs, Croats and Bosnian Muslims erupt in Australia. For example, Bosnian and Serbian fans hurled chairs and bottles at each other during the Australian Open Tennis tournament in 2009, during a match between Serb Novak Djokovic and Bosnian Amer Delic (Tallentire, 2009).

The effects and repercussions of trauma and traumatic events may be passed from one generation to the next through story telling (Kellermann, 2008). For example, Holocaust survivors may pass on the emotional impact of their experience of the holocaust to their children by the obsessive re-telling of Holocaust stories or alternately through remaining silent (Mor, 1990) ‘there are many things I have never spoken about and I have never told them to my wife and my children. I don’t want to pass my trauma and problems to my children’ (Zoran). There is evidence that children of holocaust survivors are more anxious, have lower self-esteem, and are more aggressive, than other children (Gangi, Talamo, & Ferracuti, 2009). This transgenerational transmission of the impact of trauma and violence has a direct effect on the settlement experiences of refugees in Australia. **As seen in the refugees’ testimonies, the settlement experience of their children was clearly effected by transgenerational transmission of trauma and violence.**

## **Conclusions**

Similar to previous research, the current findings suggest that separation was the most prominent acculturation strategy for this group (King, Welch & Owens, 2010). While other strategies were also evident, we argue that the experience of trauma, and the perceived stigmatization of Serbian identity resulted in a need for separation (Berry, 2013). Due partly to the considerable length of time since settling, the participants were mostly satisfied with their

new lives in Australia and did not plan to return to their homeland. Despite this, Language difficulties, discrimination, and stigmatization of Serbian identity were reported as significant obstacles to successful settlement. Nevertheless, some participants showed strong resilience, and the belief that they became stronger as a consequence of their experiences. Consistent with past research involving the settlement of war time refugees, many the participants in this study displayed signs of both PGD and PTSD (Nickerson et al., 2014; Schweitzer et al., 2006).

Given the characteristics and experiences of the participants, the complexity of trauma experiences were central to the settlement experience. In working through these experiences, refugees from this group may be able to move more successfully from separation to integration strategies (Berry, 2013). What needs to be broken is the cycle of trauma and violence transferred to Australian soils, and passed on intergenerationally.

### **Limitations**

The homogenous nature of the sample in which all were males who experienced similar traumatic experience needs to be considered in terms of the generalisation of the findings to the Serbian refugees in Australia. Future studies using a broader sample of Serbian refugees will provide more scope for generalisation and enhance validity, in particular the experiences of female refugees are needed.

### **Implications**

From the participant testimony it was clear that the most challenging aspect of working with this group of people is in dealing with trauma. For example, during the interviews, the participants preferred to talk about their traumatic past, rather than settlement experiences. Once the participants began talking about the past trauma, the first author found it difficult to change the topic. In comparison, participants often had very little to say about their settlement

experiences and current life. It is the meaning of trauma and suffering that was often pondered by these Serbian refugees. As Frankl (1984) stated “if there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering” (p.88). Siorni and Branche (2002) argued that it is impossible to treat a torture victim effectively without mentally confronting, along with the patient, the intention of the aggressor to destroy, that is inherent in methods of torture.

According to Crelinsten (2003), the central element in deconstructing the trauma reality is to rehumanize the victims. One way to do this is to allow former victims to tell their stories, which is an effective way of empowering those people who were disempowered. According to population based survey, 81% of the Serbian respondents found it important to communicate their experiences of war, and 51% of respondents said that it would be important if their suffering was acknowledged (Parmentier, Rauschenbach, Weitekamp, 2013).

We suggest that a community reflection group might be beneficial for Serbian refugees in Australia. According to Anckermann, Dominguez, Soto, Kjaerulf, Berliner, and Mikkelsen, (2005) this process of shared learning empowers the community members to restore trust and act in new ways towards problems they have in common. A spirit of solidarity is often developed which enables the community to move forward towards change and growth. For example, if members of the Serbian community are feeling that they have been demonized by the media, then appropriate community action could be taken.

At the individual level we encourage those working with Serbian refugees to help them search for meaning in their stories of trauma. The aim is to transform a personal trauma into a triumph. That will be achieved once the victim of trauma becomes a protagonist of trauma, in that way the traumatic experience becomes a special knowledge not a burden (Frankl,1985). It seems that the incomprehensibility of torture experiences is the most difficult aspect to address

for Serbian refugees ‘...I could not understand that people can do something like that. I will die but I will never understand it’ (Bozo).

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