

Title

The War Trauma and Mental Health Challenges for South Sudanese Men in the Diaspora

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Abstract

Untreated trauma has long-term consequences on people affected by traumatic experiences such as war and displacement. South Sudan is a country affected by a long civil war that left many people affected by trauma and mental health. The impact of trauma and mental health is an unresearched area within the South Sudanese population. This study examined the existing literature about the trauma and mental health issues of the South Sudanese men living in the diaspora. The consequences of post-traumatic stress disorder are very visible among individuals and families of the South Sudanese people living in the diaspora. The hostilities of the civil war did not stop the moment South Sudanese veterans ceased fire and fled their home country; the trauma and painful experiences lived beyond the final days of fighting. As a result of civil war, many families and individuals were displaced to refugee camps, and some migrated to Western countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United States, the United Kingdom and others. These families and individuals are still in the settlement phase in Western countries. During the settlement period, research, healthcare, social services and community conversations centre on settlement challenges and visible challenges and struggles, such as socio-economic, employment, language barriers and support, while little attention is given to the invisible effects of war-related trauma, especially among men.

Key words

mental health, South Sudanese men, support services, trauma, war, wellbeing

Key dates

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Indexing



Introduction

This study employed a systematic literature review methodology as a conceptual framework in organising the search, review and summary of key themes related to war trauma, mental health, migration and settlement challenges of the South Sudanese people in Western countries such as Australia, Canada, America, New Zealand and the UK. During the war, veterans were exposed to many different traumatic events. This raised the chances of developing mental health problems—like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety and depression—and poorer life outcomes as adults. As a result of the civil war, people have been displaying some challenging behaviours in the community, such as irritability, agitation, social isolation, hostility and self-destructive behaviours. While there are shared veterans' experiences across the world, Western veterans are often in a much better position compared to veterans in third-world countries. Western veterans have access to health services, physical and psychological, during and upon return from military service or war zones. However, existing literature shows this is often not the case for the South Sudanese veterans who did not fight Western-related wars but live in the West as refugees. The trauma acquired as a result of their military service is often overshadowed and exacerbated by more immediate settlement challenges. Common settlement challenges include social isolation, low socio-economic status, experiences of racism and discrimination, unfamiliarity with new laws, new norms and mental health concerns, to name a few. Research with other refugee groups suggests these challenges can be compounded by war-related trauma in veterans, but little work has been conducted with South Sudanese refugees in Australia.

Civil War in South Sudan

After almost 40 years of war between the Sudan government and southern insurgents, southern Sudanese voted in a January 2011 referendum to secede from Sudan (Blanchard, 2016). As a result of the second civil war (1983–2005), more than 2.5 million people were killed, and some 4.5 million were displaced (Blanchard, 2016). South Sudan was devastated by this civil war, which hindered the development of basic infrastructure, human capital and formal civilian institutions (Amnesty International, 1992; Human Rights Watch, 1994). Massive chronic humanitarian needs persisted after people from South Sudanese backgrounds migrated to different countries such as Australia, America, Canada, New Zealand and the UK as a result of civil war, which affected many lives. People witnessed serious events during the civil war such as killing,

torture, rape, starvation, lack of medical services, lack of food and spending many years facing the enemy with poor leave arrangements, rarely balanced by periods of rest or home leave. South Sudanese soldiers often fought at huge distances from home, in regions poorly served with transportation other than travelling on foot, which encouraged war-weariness and desertion (Human Rights Watch, 2013; International Crisis Group, 2014). Due to all these difficult events and conditions faced by individuals and families, PTSD has now emerged, along with other serious mental health problems, among war veterans within the South Sudanese male diaspora. Mental health and wellbeing for veterans are some of the most neglected service areas in South Sudanese society. This is concerning given the impact of trauma and other issues such as acculturation, shifting gender roles in families and social disadvantages impacting many individuals and families (Abur, 2019). When it comes to the existing research on South Sudanese families, settlement, mental health and wellbeing, there is a massive gap in the literature that include the experiences of the South Sudanese veterans in Australia. This is an area that has been greatly under-researched, and this paper builds the foundation for researching this issue. This paper provides mental health issues such as war trauma, settlement challenges and a critical analysis of the existing literature on this topic.

South Sudan is the newest nation in Africa with a long history of conflict, which has led to ongoing internal violence within community groups. The southern region of South Sudan was first colonised by Great Britain in 1882 and later granted independence in 1956 when Arabs mainly occupying the north took over the nation's governance with no special provision for the indigenous peoples of the south (Abur, 2018, 2019). The conflict began in 1955 because of the lack of services for people in the southern region of Sudan, where the first civil war broke out. This is referred to as the Anya-Nya I War (Abur, 2018, 2019). It ended with the Addis Ababa Peace Agreement in 1972, which promised self-government to people from the southern region, with little interference from the Khartoum Government in the north. An estimated two million people died during the second civil war alone (Momodu, 2018). Both sides recruited child soldiers into the army, which has caused many psychological impacts as well as lost lives (Momodu, 2018). The Republic of South Sudan was declared an independent nation in July 2011, a result of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) signed between the government of Sudan and the guerrilla movement in southern Sudan, known as the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) (Deng, 2005b). The CPA was signed in 2005 to end hostilities between the people of South Sudan and the government in Khartoum, predominantly led by those with Arab

backgrounds (Kevlihan, 2013). The CPA was established for a six-year interim period, during which time a number of provisions were to be implemented to assess the possibility of a unified Sudan and ensure peace prevailed in the country. The CPA also provided an opportunity for the people of South Sudan to hold a referendum to determine if they wanted Sudan to remain as one country or to choose separation at the end of the interim period. The result of this referendum led to secession from Sudan. Although the country is now independent and self-governs, hundreds of thousands of people were forced to migrate and continue to migrate to neighbouring countries, to refugee camps where they are settled as refugees or internally displaced persons (Brown et al., 2006). Many of these refugees eventually found asylum in Australia. The 2016 Census recorded 7,694 South Sudan-born people in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). This is likely to be an underestimate as in earlier censuses, people from this region were counted under 'Sudan-born'. According to the 2011 Census, most South Sudanese Australians migrated to Australia between 2003 and 2006, making this group also one of the newest migrant groups in Australia. However, those Sudanese settled in the West still suffer the consequences of not only displacements but the long-term impacts of war (Jok et al., 2004).

Methodology

First, a structured review published from the late 1990s on (the peak time of migration of many South Sudanese people to Western countries) was sought using the internet search engine. We started with an inverted pyramid of literature, where we generally searched for existing literature in the area of war, trauma, mental health, civil war and veterans. Then, we eliminated literature that was far from the research topic, narrowing it down to literature that speaks to the question and similar. This assisted in determining the number of research studies to assess, and helped formulate and clearly define our paper's purpose, scope and specific areas the review will address. This was important because it allowed us to identify which approach was appropriate for us to take.

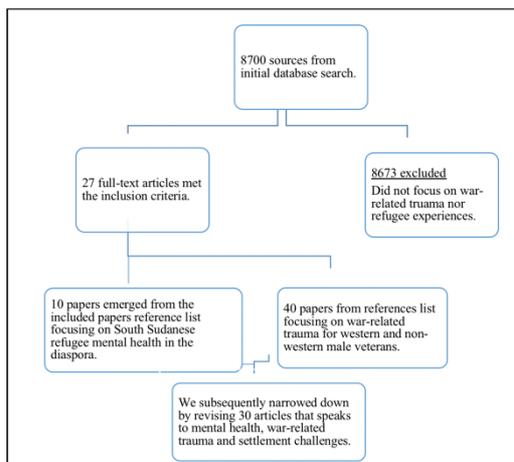
As we looked through various sources on war trauma and veterans' mental health experience in war services and reintegration into civilian society, we began to determine the objectives and scope of our review, as shown in Figure 1. This method assisted in setting boundaries and focusing on keyword selection and specific areas, which helped determine the structuring of our review into sections that address specific areas and questions. Next, we identified multiple sources for reference material to obtain a more comprehensive collection of information. We evaluated the quality of studies and assessed factors

such as study design, data collection, data analysis and interpretation and the conclusions drawn by article authors. We noted where we identified themes, grey areas, gaps and commonalities by using a table and a concept map to specify how the various sources differentiated and related to one another, and how best to use them in this paper. Notably, there were no particular peer-reviewed papers that looked at this particular topic independently or highlighted research in the area of the South Sudanese migration and war experiences. Therefore, this paper exposes the gaps and great need for support services to address war trauma within the South Sudanese population in the diaspora and in South Sudan. Our aim is to raise awareness about historical war trauma difficulties, mental health, wellbeing and interventions or need for support services for the African (South Sudanese) men living in diasporas such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and America. We aim to draw on existing literature to identify efforts to document and address male South Sudanese veterans' trauma and mental health, and gaps in service delivery for this population.

Literature findings

Based on the electronic systematic literature review search, 8700 publications were identified and not de-duplicated; 27 full-text articles were independently assessed and met the inclusion criteria; 10 further papers were found in reference lists of included papers; and 40 papers reported data from 38 studies (see Figure 1). Through revision, we subsequently narrowed the literature to 30 Australian papers that speak to mental health, settlement challenges and war-related trauma for migrant men and their families. The key themes from the findings were mental health, war trauma, lack of support services for South Sudanese veterans, difficult experiences of settlement and migration, and lack of recognition of mental health issues and intervention.

Figure 1: Flow chart of study inclusion and exclusion



Literature

It was important to examine available literature on veterans and war-related trauma mental health. Research shows that the healthcare needs of veterans are complex (Hodson & McFarlane, 2016), linked to both their own experiences as service members and the distinctive psychosocial issues connected with transitioning to civilian life (Blackburn, 2016; Chandrasekaran, 2017). Several factors associated with military service contribute to the development of physical, mental, emotional and social health problems in veterans. These include the intensive physical activities associated with military life, physical trauma, poor health conditions, psychological trauma and exposure to toxic substances (Beard & Kamel, 2015). In Western countries, veterans' transition to civilian life has also been identified as problematic (Blackburn, 2016). For example, the Washington Post/Kaiser Family Foundation study in the US found that in a sample of 800 veterans, about 70% felt the general community did not understand their experience (Chandrasekaran, 2017). Many of these veterans felt disconnected from civilian life due to profound differences between civilian and military life. In the case of South Sudanese veterans settled in the West, the transition to civilian life is not the only challenge; the transition to a new country with new norms, social expectations, language and lifestyle compound these existing challenges to transitioning to civilian life.

A systematic literature search was conducted to identify historical war trauma and mental health-related issues among the South Sudanese population, with a particular focus on war veterans. This was a systematic search using keywords and synonyms related to the topic. However, before we get into the methodological processes of this paper, we first provide a snapshot of what literature review is, its

importance in research and the process by which it is conducted.

For a literature review to become a proper research methodology, as with any other research, proper steps need to be followed, and action taken to ensure the review is accurate, precise and trustworthy. As with all research, the value of an academic review depends on what was done, what was found and the clarity of reporting (Moher et al., 2009). Depending on the purpose of the review, the researcher can use several strategies, standards and guidelines developed especially for conducting a literature review. For several research questions such as this, a literature review is the best methodological tool to provide answers, grey areas and a road map for further studies. For example, reviews are useful when the researcher wants to evaluate a theory or evidence in a certain area or examine the validity or accuracy of a certain theory or competing theories (Tranfield et al., 2003). This approach can be narrow, such as investigating the effect of or relationship between two specific variables, or it can be broader, such as exploring the collective evidence in a certain research area. In addition, literature reviews are useful when the aim is to provide an overview of a certain issue or research problem. Typically, this type of literature review is conducted to evaluate the state of knowledge on a particular topic, which in this case is the war trauma and mental health challenges for South Sudanese men in the diaspora. It can be used, for example, to create research agendas, identify research gaps, or simply discuss a particular matter. Literature reviews can also be useful if the aim is to engage in theory development (Baumeister & Leary, 1997; Torraco, 2005). In these cases, a literature review provides the basis for building a new conceptual model or theory, and it can be valuable when aiming to map the development of particular research and gaps within that field. However, it is important to note that the method used depends on the goal of the literature review. For instance, some review takes a *systematic approach*, *semi-systemic* and/or *integrative review*, to name a few. Generally, the basic steps and important choices involved in conducting a literature review typically involve four phases: (1) designing the review, (2) conducting the review, (3) analysis and (4) writing up the review. This process was developed from practical experience and is a synthesis of and influenced by various standards and guidelines suggested for literature reviews (e.g., Liberati et al., 2009; Tranfield et al., 2003; Wong et al., 2013).

Mental health and trauma

PTSD and other mental health issues are more likely to emerge among the war-affected populations, such as in South Sudan (Ayazi et al., 2014, Paardekooper et al., 1999). The negative impact of war trauma is

well documented in research (Ayazi et al., 2015). People who are exposed to war-related events are more likely to suffer mental health-related issues in the long term unless proper rehabilitation and support services are available (Abur & Mphande, 2020; Ayazi et al., 2015). The long civil war left very serious trauma and mental health issues in South Sudan and people from South Sudan who migrated and resettled in Western countries (Abur & Mphande, 2020). Some of the issues observed across the South Sudanese community are clear signs and symptoms of PTSD and other mental health issues such as depression and anxiety disorder (Anyieth, 2021). Conflict remains high in the community and within families because of the unresolved impact of civil war. Mental health issues or trauma exist in every society, but they are more likely to occur among people who come from conflict-affected areas or have experienced displacement and subsequent migration to a place where the culture and lifestyle are different to their own (Abur, 2019; Cross & Bloomer, 2010; Fozdar & Salter, 2019; Wamwayi & Marray, 2019). The impact of trauma is felt in different ways by South Sudanese people; however, it is often acute for veterans who were engaged in the frontline during the civil war in South Sudan (Anyieth, 2021). Mental health and PTSD are impacting and, in some cases, ruining the lives of veterans. Their experiences in civil war and hardship remain unresolved (Abur & Mphande, 2020). There are no support services established to support veterans and address PTSD for South Sudanese men living in the diaspora and those still living in South Sudan. The status of their mental health and wellbeing are significantly neglected, which can greatly impact their relationship with their wives and children (Anyieth, 2021).

Mental health and trauma issues are not discussed openly in South Sudan and many African community groups because of cultural beliefs and taboos associated with mental health (Amuyunzu-Nyamongo, 2013). Open discussion on mental health and seeking help is not common in the South Sudanese community for several reasons (Abur & Mphande, 2019). For instance, protection of the family's social stigma, fear of discrimination and ostracism from the community make the illness a hidden issue, which makes it more complicated for someone to seek professional support services (Abur & Mphande, 2020). Some veterans have engaged in domestic violence and negative politics on social media platforms as a way of expressing their frustrations and struggle with mental health-related issues (Anyieth, 2021). In addition, these premigration stressors and mental illnesses have been exacerbated by the socio-economic challenges South Sudanese men face in the host country (Abur & Spaij, 2016). South Sudanese veterans not only came from a war-torn country but also have a long history of experiencing famine and poverty (Ventevogel et al.,

2013). Studies such as Amuyunzu-Nyamongo's (2013) have identified that poverty and mental health are closely related, implying that people living in poverty are more vulnerable to mental illness, while those with pre-existing mental illness are more likely to become trapped in poverty due to decreased capacity to function optimally. There is a great need for targeted services and research to be conducted in this field to better understand the needs of veterans and their family members.

Settlement challenges

South Sudanese who migrated to different parts of the world encountered many settlement challenges such as culture shock, language barriers, unemployment, managing family and raising young people in a new culture different to their own. Mental health is also one of the challenges facing people who have witnessed war and other difficult situations. Some of the mental health issues encountered, including PTSD, are impacting and ruining the lives of young families (Abur, 2019). Being a refugee and resettling in an unfamiliar environment carries many complex experiences, including loss of stability and cultural change. One must work hard to understand the culture of a host country and entitlement system that requires certain levels of education to fully comprehend (Abur, 2019; Abur & Mphande, 2020). The adjustment to a new culture and new environment is a challenging process that each refugee is likely to go through regardless of where they come from. Often, refugees tend to be marginalised in their new societies and even ostracised, which causes further suffering, feelings of alienation, and in some cases accepting a lower status than they held in their country of origin (Abur, 2018). The experiences of refugees in the settlement process often involve unforeseen issues, such as meeting new groups of people and unfamiliar social norms. Upon arrival, the socially constructed norms and values of place turn refugees' lives upside down (Abur, 2018). One settlement challenge is understanding the language of the new country. Language is human capital used to communicate skills, knowledge and experience, and engage well with the general population. English is a second language for South Sudanese refugees, and this applies to their children. South Sudanese languages continue in areas and now lived-in cities, wanting and needing to be supported by their communities to provide some sense of continuation, particularly until the various traumas caused by war and the loss of loved ones are faced and resolved (Abur, 2019).

Discussion

Military services in any part of the world are characterised as an organisation with a formal structure, a cultural group governed by norms, values

and principles, and a social group that provides people with identities and a sense of belonging (Lane & Wallace, 2020). Therefore, when service personnel retire or leave the military services for whatever reason, that sense of structure, identity and belonging become disoriented. There are many challenges veterans face upon leaving the military service—issues on micro levels and macro levels, such as social acceptance and belonging. Veterans face health conditions ranging from severe to not-so-severe conditions, including physical handicaps and poor mental and emotional health. In addition, veterans face relationship challenges with their almost new self in the civilian society, challenges with reorienting to their families and homelessness for those without families. These are very important challenges, and the Australian government funds veterans' services to meet the demand for these needs.

The population in South Sudan has encountered various aspects of conflict and displacement. The long civil war has impacted different generations in South Sudan, and the lack of support services and healthcare treatment has worsened the lives of people (Tankink & Richters, 2007). Those who migrated to different countries carried severe trauma with them, and settlement in their new countries made it more challenging to manage their past trauma (Abur, 2019; Badre et al., 2012; Karunakara et al., 2014). PTSD has recently gained the attention of researchers. People who are exposed to war-related events are more likely to experience trauma in their lives (Ayazi et al., 2015). This has also led to serious negative health outcomes when no intervention support services are given to individuals who have encountered war trauma events (Abur & Mphande, 2019). Trauma experiences can be different from person to person, but it has overwhelming long-term consequences if not treated. A person may have serious difficulties in keeping meaningful relationships, such as family relationships and professional network relationships. People with traumatic experiences are more likely to suffer long-term with other mental health-related issues such as suicidal thoughts, depression, a lack of organisation and motivation in life (Tankink & Richters, 2007). Mental health and PTSD are impacting and ruining the lives of young families and individuals (Abur, 2019). There is no doubt that mental health issues are affecting many people within the South Sudanese community across the globe. We know that many South Sudanese have experienced extreme levels of conflict, displacement, racism and discrimination prior to coming to Australia (Abur, 2019 & Anyieth, 2021). Long civil war and displacement have left serious wounds and mental health problems in many people (Abur & Mphande, 2019). Some of the negative behaviours displayed on social media are just examples of how the consequences of war and mental health problems are affecting individuals. There is a great need for

rehabilitation for the generation affected by the long civil war. Trauma remains a serious issue for many people. Mental health issues brought by war trauma and displacement have not been addressed well from the arrival of South Sudanese migrants.

Many South Sudanese men are experiencing a number of challenges similar to the experiences of Australian veterans, including disability, loneliness, mental and emotional health, feeling overwhelmed, and financial difficulties. In addition to these shared challenges among veterans, there are challenges unique to the South Sudanese veterans in the diaspora. South Sudanese veterans additionally face language barriers, adaptation to new social norms and society, marginalisation from the wider society, racism and discrimination in socio-economic advancement, and additional family duties and responsibilities as family members depend on them due to the patriarchal expectations of heading the family in their society. The existing system of patriarchy in South Sudanese family dynamics is sometimes furthered by what is already identified among the wider Australian veterans; war veterans are often at risk for lower relationship satisfaction and higher rates of separation and divorce. This has become a heighten challenge for the South Sudanese men who are already feeling like failures and worthless because they are unable to be sole providers for their families. Their already fragile lives are often compounded by a lack of good communication patterns resulting in violence and family breakdown.

In 2015, the Australian Department of Veterans' Affairs commissioned a review of literature on the health and wellbeing needs of veterans to inform future programs and services. While this review explored the health needs for Australian veterans—similar to many other studies and reviews of the literature exploring veterans' health, namely physical, mental and social wellness—none included veterans of South Sudanese origins. However, given the complexities of the issues facing the growing number of male South Sudanese veterans in Australia, we thought to capture the scope of what exists on South Sudanese veterans by undertaking this rapid review of the literature.

In this review of the literature, we have explored what exists in the field of veterans, South Sudanese men as veterans, mental health and war-related traumas. We examined literature that similarly focused on Western veterans, with little to no focus on South Sudanese veterans' experiences after the war. The review demonstrates that veterans experience mental, physical and social health problems related to life after military services, an experience compounded by settlement challenges for the South Sudanese veterans. This review sought to bring to light the need to conduct research on South Sudanese veterans to

better understand their experiences, their health and mental wellbeing encompassing three main attributes of wellness (physical, mental and social wellbeing) (Blackburn, 2016). Understanding and recognising South Sudanese veterans interconnected experiences of war-related trauma, mental health and settlement challenges may facilitate early identification and improvement in addressing and management of South Sudanese veterans' health.

We recommend further research in this area of trauma with the South Sudanese veterans to add more understanding of the experiences and complex issues faced by ex-soldiers from the South Sudanese population living in Western countries. This is highly important for appropriate service provision, treatment, prevention and even early identification of veterans at risk of developing long-term issues at a later stage of their settlement.

Generally, the literature identifies veterans' reluctance to help-seeking, particularly for mental health problems. This reluctance is to be expected from the South Sudanese veterans for a number of reasons: they come from a country with very minimal to no healthcare services for veterans; they come from a war-torn country where their main focus was on survival and the survival of their loved ones; Western veterans' services have not been inclusive of them and their experiences; and they come from a very patriarchal society in which men are expected to hide signs of suffering, especially when it comes to mental and emotional wellness. All these issues will need to be considered when conducting research with these men. However, with a culturally appropriate research design, such research can help these former soldiers (South Sudanese veterans) to identify their own war-related traumas, challenges and mental health concerns. This important work will assist in extending existing veteran services to veterans from South Sudanese backgrounds.

Limitations

Throughout the duration of researching literature and formulating this paper, certain limitations were experienced. These include time delays for various reasons and specific ones relating to the actual literature review. The first difficulty was around access to trustworthy studies and data. Although this paper's intention is to critically appraise the current knowledge in this subject area, it has suffered significantly from the limited available literature concerning South Sudanese men as veterans, their mental health experiences, and their overall wellbeing past the war times. Most veteran research centres, affairs and clinics in Western countries such as Australia had little to do with South Sudanese veterans leaving the diaspora, making it difficult to

access data on their experience and research findings. However, though this relatively low representation in existing literature has been a disadvantage for the paper, it was also an advantage because it has driven the need for this paper. We realised during the search the huge demand for this specific area to be brought into the academic arena.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to provide a starting point for further research on the war trauma mental health and wellbeing of the South Sudanese population that have served in the South Sudan army and military and for those who were affected by a long civil war. We aimed to find existing literature on this topic. We critically examined what was available with an aim to expand this topic in a research paper that could potentially bring forth South Sudanese veterans' experiences and provide some alternative solutions for interventions for PTSD and other mental health-related issues. Despite an extreme lack of literature on this topic, we managed to give a summary of South Sudanese people, civil war, migration to Australia and a snapshot of challenges facing South Sudanese in the process of their settlement. We have examined existing literature focus and findings around veterans' mental health and trauma. To reiterate, a key finding of the review is the lack of inclusivity of South Sudanese veterans in veterans studies and services and recognition of their war-related traumas that can sometimes result in the experience of mental health, especially when compounded by settlement challenges. Therefore, the findings support the value of conducting a South Sudanese veterans' mental health study to ensure that experience, war-related traumatic experiences and mental illness are taken care of using evidence-based findings.

Declarations

Funding: This project has not received any funding, and there is no conflict of interest associated with this project. There was no ethics approval required for this project; it was a literature review research project.

Conflict of interest

We have no conflict of interest.

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