



Refugees, Asylum Seekers & Practitioners' Perspectives of Embodied Trauma

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Introduction

With the population of displaced individuals reaching over 25 million people worldwide, exacerbated by the recent humanitarian emergencies in the Ukraine, Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, Africa, Central America and Venezuela, there is an urgent need to better understand and rapidly assess manifestations of trauma, with a focus on providing a culturally informed assessment method to expedite interventions for those in distress. Studies have pointed towards the need for a comprehensive scoping review of the research literature to fully explicate the concept of embodied trauma, bridging the gap between phenomenological lived experience of displaced individuals and the many treatments available (Murphy et al., 2021; Van Der Kolk, 2014).

Aims & Objectives

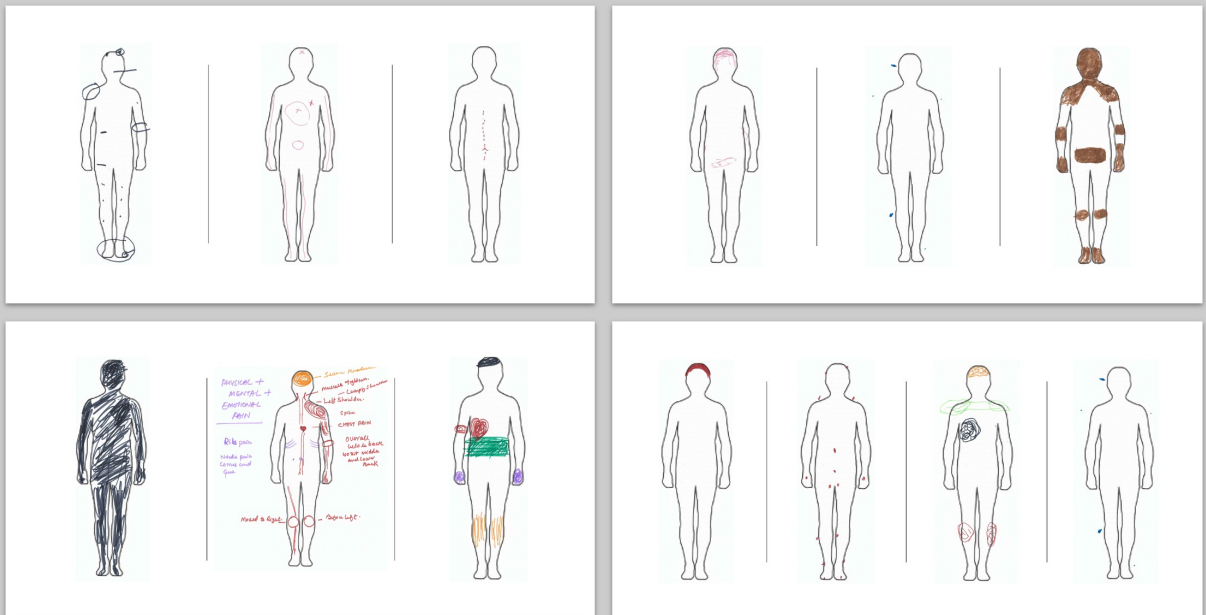
Aims: To inform psychotherapeutic practice by answering the following research questions:

- What is embodied trauma?
- How is embodied trauma experienced by displaced individuals?
- How is embodied trauma being successfully treated in practice?

Objectives: To answer the research questions by:

- Defining the novel term 'embodied trauma'
- Body mapping refugees and asylum seekers' embodied trauma
- Exploring how practitioners assess and treat embodied trauma
- Making proposals for culturally and trauma informed practice

Figure 1. Results of Body Mapping Embodied Trauma with Refugees and Asylum Seekers



Methods

A three part study was operationalised:

Study 1: performed a five stage comprehensive scoping review of the literature to define and explicate the concept of embodied trauma.

Study 2: used a qualitative, semi-structured interview and body mapping exercises to explore displaced individuals phenomenological experiences of embodied trauma.

Study 3: used a qualitative, semi-structured interview to explore practitioners' perspectives of working therapeutically with embodied trauma. Data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

Results

What is Embodied Trauma?

"Embodied trauma is the whole body's response to a significant traumatic event, where mental distress is experienced within the body as a physiological, psychological, biological, cultural, or relational reaction to trauma. Embodied trauma may include psychosomatic symptoms alongside the inability to self-regulate the autonomic nervous system and emotions, resulting in states of dissociation, numbing, relational disconnection, changed perceptions or non-verbal internal experiences which affect every-day functioning."

O'Brien & Charura (2022). Refugees, Asylum Seekers, & Practitioners' Perspectives of Embodied Trauma. <https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0001342>

How is Embodied Trauma Experienced by Displaced Individuals?

Our second study mapped and explicated the embodied trauma experiences of 13 displaced individuals in the North of England, UK.

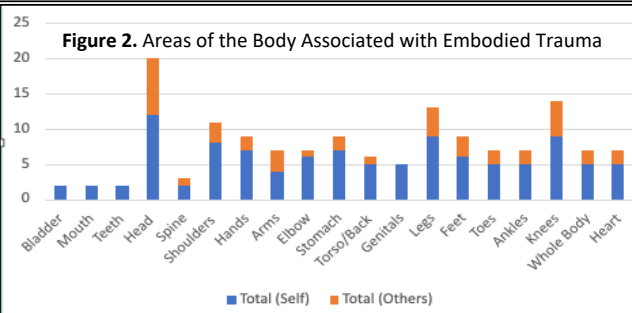
Figure 1 reports displaced individuals' body mapping results

Figure 2 reports the commonly reported areas of the body related to experiences of embodied trauma.

How is Embodied Trauma Being Successfully Treated in Practice?

This research is currently in progress with practitioners.

Figure 2. Areas of the Body Associated with Embodied Trauma



Conclusions & Clinical Implication

The conclusions of our study report the need to:

- Provide culturally and trauma informed assessment and intervention for embodied trauma in mental health work with displaced individuals.
- Promote the use of body mapping as a culturally informed assessment tool for psychotraumatology.