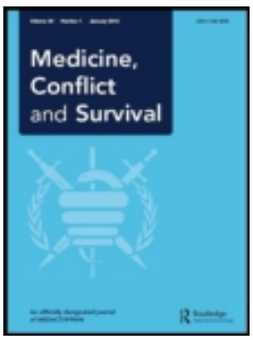

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Stories of Pre-war, War and Exile: Bosnian Refugee Children in Sweden

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While standardized questionnaires produce counts of isolated events, a semi-structured interview derives a story, a complex narrative in time and place. Ninety Bosnian refugee children and adolescents (ages 1–20), resettled in Sweden, were assessed in a semi-structured clinical interview designed to identify and offer support to children at risk. A family-child account of traumatic exposure was analysed quantitatively and qualitatively. Type-stories or clusters of experience were identified for three distinct periods: prior to war, during war, and after war in exile. The extent of trauma-stress exposure during each of these periods proved unrelated. Pre-war experience presented as preponderantly good and safe. Differences in child exposure during war and exile could be understood in relation to identifiable socio-demographic factors; particularly ethnic background, social class, child age and family size. Further, the stories derived cast light on the equity of Swedish refugee reception, exposing both egalitarian and discriminatory tendencies.

KEYWORDS Bosnian refugees Children Adolescents Interview Trauma

Introduction

Trauma creates a breach in time. The normal process by which new experience becomes integrated into the ongoing autobiography of our minds falls apart. Instead the memories of trauma accumulate as isolated fragments with their own haunting and burning luminance. What happened feels at once unreal – unconnected to the self we had known and lived with – and all too real, continually flooding the mind.[1-3]

Focusing on trauma in a clinical interview can set the stage for a reparative process. By eliciting a story of what happened – a chronological narrative in time and place – isolated fragments can begin to fall together, the shadows of unreality and meaninglessness begin to disperse.[4-6]

In the context of research, however, the question remains as to how to structure and categorize the richly detailed and unique stories to which the clinician may become privy. For while standardized questionnaires can

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produce exact tables of specific occurrences, they seldom do justice to the complex inter-relationship of events that is at the core of experience and of memory.[7] Clinical stories offer the potential for extracting another form of understanding, while at the same time encouraging the child and family in the direction of healing.[8–10]

The research is derived from a physical and mental health examination of refugee children, focusing upon trauma, distress and resilience. Clinically, the examination serves to identify and offer support to children at risk. This paper specifically concerns the traumatic experience of a group of refugee children from former Yugoslavia. Common to all was that their families had been driven in exile by the war in Bosnia 1992–95, and that as refugees in Sweden they had been assigned to the town of Umeå.

The vast majority of refugee war studies evaluate traumatic exposure as a count of fixed specific events. Two considerations prompted the use of an alternative method of analysis.

First, the clinical interview encouraged a narrative response. To reduce that story to a count of isolated events would be misleading. Any single event might be omitted simply because it lay outside the story the family engaged in presenting.

Second, to treat as equal entities experiences so divergent as ethnic taunting and months of repetitive bombardment, appeared grossly inadequate.[11] After listening in depth to the accounts of war-traumatized refugee children, the need for a more complex description and quantification of exposure was in order.[12]

This paper proposes a method for structuring, ranking and comparing clinically derived child stories of pre-war, war and exile. It offers a qualitative and quantitative description of events that are traumatic, complex and extended in time. Further, it examines the relationship of these events to socio-demographic background factors. While previous studies of war-traumatized children have related such factors to mental health outcome, few have addressed their relation to traumatic experience itself.[12–14] War, as in Bosnia, may render a large number of children refugees, but treats them in other respects grossly unequally: is this the fortune of fate or the work of identifiable socio-demographic factors?

Method

Subjects

In the wake of the war in Bosnia, nearly 75,000 refugees found asylum in Sweden. Approximately one-third of these were children. The target of the study was the entire population of 'Serbo-Croatian' speaking child refugee families assigned to Umeå and surrounding municipalities during 1994–95. Of a total of 57 such families, 50 (88%) agreed to participate in the study. The seven non-participating families (12%) included five who declined immediately and two who withdrew after the first assessment.

At the time of interview the 50 participating families contained 90 children with an age span of one month to 20 years. Of the total child population, 75 were born and could be assessed for the period prior to the outbreak of war; 81 for the period of war and/or regional flight; all 90 for the period of exile in Sweden. An abbreviated characterization of the child population at each of these periods is presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1
SUMMARIZED CHARACTERISTICS OF THE STUDY POPULATION PRIOR TO, DURING AND AFTER THE WAR

Characteristics	Number of children		
	Prior to War	War and Regional Flight	Exile in Sweden
Total population	75	81	90
Sex			
girl	36	41	44
boy	39	40	46
Age group			
0–6 years	41	41	37
7–12 years	25	27	34
13–20 years	9	13	19
Ethnicity of child			
Bosniac (Bosnian Muslim)	27	31	34
Bosnian Croat	12	12	12
Bosnian Serb	4	4	4
Romany	20	22	26
mixed	12	12	14

Each family gave their written informed consent to participate, and the study was approved by the research ethics committee of the medical faculty at Umeå University.

Assessment

Assessment was made as part of a physical and mental health examination, conducted jointly by clinicians from the paediatric and child psychiatric units, together with the family's refugee social worker. The examination was offered to all newly arrived refugee families in Umeå and was generally conducted six to ten months after arrival. Their total time living in Sweden, however, varied markedly, in that families were detained for unequal periods in Swedish refugee camps prior to town placement.

A semi-structured interview was conducted with the family as a whole, after which each school-aged child (seven years or older) was also interviewed alone. Trauma-stress exposure was obtained as a narrative story in response to pre-established, generally framed prompts specific for each time period (Table 2A). All events reported were followed up by detailed questions as to exactly what happened, how often and with whom.

The family-child story was recorded as yes-no answers to the pre-established prompts, accompanied by a detailed description of any reported experience.

TABLE 2A
EXAMPLE OF SELECTED PROMPTS FROM THE SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

SELECTED PROMPTS
Was the child a witness to violence? If yes, in what form, how often, toward whom?
Was the child subjected to direct violence? If yes, in what form, how often?
Was the child accompanied or alone at the time of violence? If accompanied, by whom?

TABLE 2B
FACTOR DEFINITIONS AND SCORING STRATEGY BASED ON THE SELECTED PROMPTS ABOVE

FACTOR 'PROXIMATE VIOLENCE'	SCORE
The child was a witness to violence in the form of destruction of property, physical threat	1
The child was a witness to violence in the form of blows or assault, firing, arrest, sexual violation, torture, death or the child viewed war injured or dead bodies	2
The child was a witness to violence on a single occasion	1
The child was a witness to violence on multiple occasions	2
The child was a witness to violence directed at strangers or friends	1
The child was a witness to violence directed at relatives or nuclear family	2
The child was subjected to direct violence in the form of destruction of property, physical threat	1
The child was subjected to direct violence in the form of blows or assault, firing, arrest, torture	2
The child was subjected to direct violence on a single occasion	1
The child was subjected to direct violence on multiple occasions	2
The child experienced proximate violence as grotesque or life-threatening	1
The child was alone as witness or when subjected to proximate violence	1

For paired statements, the most severe alternative only was scored.

All of the interviews were conducted in 'Serbo-Croatian', with one and the same accredited interpreter engaged for nearly all families. Interviews were held alone by one of two clinicians (Goldin or Levin). Prior to the start of the study, the two had worked closely together for three years in child-refugee evaluation and had collaborated in the development of the prompts and recording protocol for the study. The first two interviews were performed together and coded separately. Interrater reliability was tested with regard to overall child assessment (kappa=.81). This process was repeated again after one year (kappa=.85).

Analysis

To analyse and compare child exposure three scoring *profiles* of trauma-stress were constructed. The scoring profiles were developed on the following four principles:

- The child's life was conceived of in terms of three distinct periods of time: prior to the war, during the war, and after the war. Each period was structured by a separate profile, in that the spectrum of reported experiences differed so radically. Earlier studies of Cambodian refugees in the United States established the importance of investigating and distinguishing among war, resettlement and everyday life experience.[15]
- Events reported were categorized either as acts of acute violence (*trauma*) or as conditions of long-term *stress*. This distinction corresponded to that often made in life-events research between events discrete in time and difficulties extending over four weeks or more.[16]
- Events were grouped together into a limited number of *factors*, established by the generally framed prompts (Table 2B). In this way stories were quantified on uniform grounds without compromising the enormous diversity of individual experience actually presented. War events, for example, were grouped into seven factors similar to those employed by Macksoud:[13] proximate violence, distant bombing and shelling, other acute trauma; persecution and deprivation, forced separation, family reunion, other long-term stress.

  The factor family reunion demands a word of explanation. Child refugee studies often ignore reunion, regarding it as an 'automatic', longed for sequel to forced separation. However, reunion has a definite impact of its own. Particularly after long delay or where the returning parent bears frightening or humiliating experiences (combat, concentration camp residence) reunion may profoundly affect relationships between child and parent, and abruptly disrupt family patterns established during separation.[17, 18]
- Within each factor, events were differentially scored in an attempt to preserve the clinical meaningfulness of the story (Table 2B). In a narrative context, life events strike as differentially alarming, not as equal and addable entities. The trauma-stress scoring profiles employed three criteria for differentially weighting events: intensity (for example, violation or non-violation of bodily integrity), repetitiveness-duration (multiple occurrence or not), relation to the afflicted (close kinship or not).[19–21]

In this way a numerical score was awarded for the events within each factor, and factors summed to a total score for each profile. Stories from each profile period were then placed in ranked score order and reread in succession, separately by each clinician. Cut-off lines were drawn where stories appeared to change character qualitatively, establishing a limited

number of *clusters* for each profile period. The cut-off lines proposed independently by the two clinicians were markedly similar. Thus, clusters comprised stories qualitatively alike and consecutive in score range.

Results are presented as a comparison of clusters (rather than of individual scores) to emphasize the inter-relatedness of events to form qualitatively distinct story wholes. For each profile period, clusters were examined descriptively with regard to the range and pattern of experiences reported, and illustrated by a short vignette. Quantitative differences in total score and factor sub-scores were tested for significance. Thereafter, clusters were analysed in relation to socio-demographic background variables proposed to contribute to the reported variance in exposure. Finally, the relationship between child cluster assignment in each of the three profile periods was explored.

For background variables such as *family social class*, *parent educational level* and *war activity in the child's home town*, a Bosnian doctoral student in sociology was actively engaged to ensure categorization was culturally relevant. Social class assignment was based upon occupation, years of work experience and educational background.

Statistical Analysis

Differences in total profile score and sub-scores among clusters were tested by the Kruskal-Wallis non-parametric test. Comparison of clusters in relation to categorical background variables was performed by the Fisher exact test. This test was also used for the comparison of child cluster assignment for the three profile periods.

Results

Trauma-Stress Prior to War

Trauma-stress prior to the war was comprised of severe everyday life events: sickness, death, accidents and parental divorce.

For the children in the study, total score on the profile Prior to War ranged from 0–4 points. Profile score separated study children into two clusters: those with and those without early stressful experience.

Cluster 0P (total score = 0, n = 62) comprised the overwhelming majority of children. Life prior to the war was characterized as 'good'. Strong family ties, work, fruit trees or a small patch of garden, school, cousins and friends gave life meaning and predictability. In retrospect at least, no events of severe trauma-stress affecting the child came to mind.

Cluster 1P (total score = 1–4, n = 13) reported stressful experience prior to the war. The predominant picture was still a detailed recount of the good life, but with at least one exception: a child's foot crushed by a car, a fall on the head followed by strange epileptic-like seizures. Children were born prematurely, subjected to repeated operations, hospitalized

under long periods without parental attendance. Parents divorced, grandparent guardians sickened, close relatives died. Events reported were both acutely traumatic and long-term stressful, but the total numbers were too small to make that distinction meaningful.

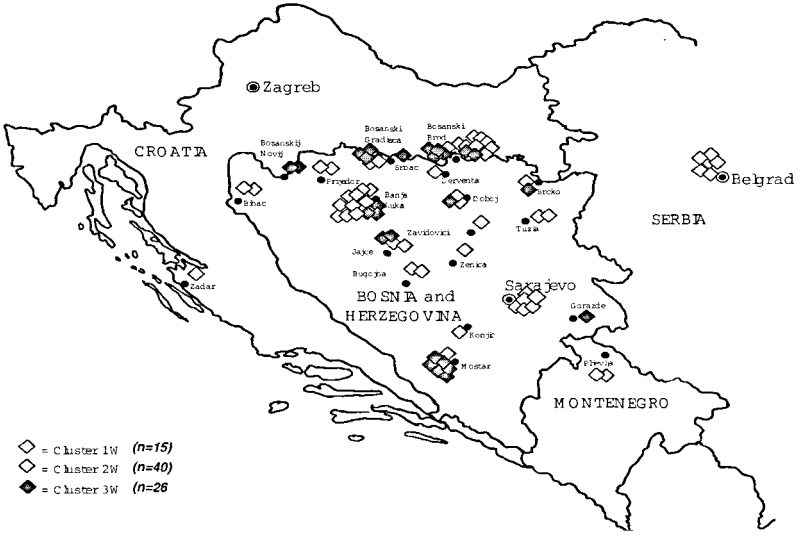
Cluster 1P was over-represented by the children of fathers with least education. No other socio-demographic characteristic examined significantly differentiated Prior to War clusters.

Trauma-Stress in War

War experience separated grossly into two categories – acute trauma and long-term stress. Each category was subdivided into a limited number of factors: trauma into proximate violence, distant violence and everyday life violence; stress into deprivation-persecution, forced separation, family reunion and everyday life stress.

For the children in the study, total score on the profile War ranged from 0–36 points. Trauma-stress exposure accumulated in a patterned fashion such that three qualitatively distinct clusters emerged, each with its own

FIGURE 1
TOWN OF RESIDENCE AT THE OUTBREAK OF WAR IN RELATION TO PROFILE WAR CLUSTER ASSIGNMENT



type-story of war experience and its own specific score range.

Cluster 1W (total score = 0–8, n = 15) had access to a place of safety. Either their hometowns were geographically removed from areas of intense combat (Belgrade, Tuzla) or they succeeded in fleeing early in the war to relatives outside the combat zones (Zagreb) (Figure 1). Consequently, war exposure, both in terms of acute trauma and long-term stress, was least intrusive (Table 3).

Two-thirds (10/15) of Cluster 1W had no experience of acute trauma whatsoever. For the remaining third, violence was a distant or solitary event – shelling on the other side of town, an isolated 'warning shot', a day or two hidden in the attic from police. No child was exposed to a situation of a life-threatening character.

TABLE 3
DIFFERENCE IN TOTAL SCORE AND SUB-SCORES ON PROFILE 'WAR' IN RELATION TO WAR CLUSTER ASSIGNMENT

	Cluster 1 War n=15 Means	Cluster 2 War n=40 Means	Cluster 3 War n=26 Means	p-value
Total Trauma-Stress in War	4.1	16.1	31.2	< .001
Acute Trauma	0.9	6.7	16.2	< .001
1. Proximate violence	0.5	4.2	12.7	< .001
2. Distant violence	0.1	2.0	3.0	< .001
3. Everyday-life violence	0.3	0.4	0.5	
Long-term Stress	3.2	9.4	15.0	< .001
4. Deprivation and Persecution	2.0	4.5	7.4	< .001
5. Forced Separation	1.2	4.1	4.7	< .001
6. Family Reunion	0.0	0.7	2.6	< .001
7. Everyday-life stress	0.0	0.1	0.3	< .05

Deprivation and persecution, the inevitable companions of ethnic war, were of course present. Many of the Cluster 1W children suffered the physical and emotional discomfort of repeated flight from one place of refuge to another; but, almost without exception, these children had access to relatives, food and warm shelter.

Finally, Cluster 1W enjoyed a greater degree of parental protection and stability than the children in the other two clusters. Only a quarter (4/15) were forcibly separated from a parent by the war. Separation was occasioned by the mother and child sent off to safety, not by the father mobilized to front-line duty. Further, none of these children were made privy (during the war period) to the violence and hardship the father endured alone back in their home town, as sustained family reunion occurred first in Sweden.

> A, six years old, and her older sister came from a small town in central Bosnia. Her father had a private medical practice, her mother was employed as a pharmacist.
>
> In April 1992, two weeks before the war reached their town, the mother fled with A and her sister to an elderly relative in Croatia. That summer, the mother rented a private cottage at the sea; the father came to visit once a month.
>
> In the autumn, the war grew more intense. For the first time the mother explained that they were actually in forced exile. They moved

in with relatives in Zagreb. The father was still working in their now-occupied home town; telephone connections were severed, his safety uncertain. After three months of nervous waiting, the father arrived and they fled immediately by plane to Sweden.

Cluster 2W (total score = 9–24, n = 40) came predominantly from places of danger (Figure 1). Either their hometowns were immediately and forcibly occupied (Banja Luka) or subjected to long-term bombardment and fierce combat (Sarajevo, Bosanski Brod). War was all around (Table 3). Early flight, when undertaken, was broken off too soon or led only to new places of unsafe refuge.

Almost without exception (36/40) the children of Cluster 2W were victims of acute trauma. Violence was seldom an isolated event as for Cluster 1W. In towns besieged, sniper and artillery fire persisted for months, repeatedly forcing the children into damp cellars and other inadequate shelters. In occupied towns, the children had contact with battered friends and relatives, and were wakened at night to aimless gunfire and sporadic bombing. A number of children witnessed explosions close by – an adjacent mosque left in ruins, a neighbour's house in flames. But with few exceptions, Cluster 2W still enjoyed an unscathed zone – home and person were not physically violated.

Hardship and discrimination were more widespread and severe than in Cluster 1W. The children endured months of scarce food and water. Forced regional flight led to a tent lodging in the winter cold; to a primitive ramshackle cottage without electricity. Exposure to ethnic discrimination was the rule (32/40). Freedom of movement was curtailed by decree or by tactics of random terror; schools closed to the ethnic minorities; anonymous telephone threats repeated.

Further, forced parental separation was far more prevalent than in Cluster 1W. Over two-thirds (28/40) of Cluster 2W were torn from a parent by the war; the vast majority as a result of the father's recruitment to active combat. Separation was clearly associated with the father's potential death.

M, eight years old, and her younger brother came from a small town in northern Bosnia. When the war broke out, the father enlisted. For M, the father's front-line duty occasioned long periods of fearful waiting: weeks of separation, interrupted by a few days reunion, and a new, painful departure.

At the same time M's hometown was under attack. Bombing and artillery fire were recurrent. At first, the mother forced her into the cellar at each air-raid warning. After a time they became almost immune to the sound of sirens. As the fighting drew closer, the mother fled with M and her brother to relatives across the river in Croatia. Even there bombardment was intense, but shelter more protective. On many nights M was forced to sleep in shelter, her play pistol beside her for security.

Cluster 3W (total score = 25–36, n = 26), like Cluster 2W, came from towns horribly and undeniably caught up in the war (Mostar, Bosanski Brod, Banja Luka, Bosanski Gradisca) (Figure 1).

Acute trauma was at once more pervasive and frighteningly more intrusive in Cluster 3W than in the other two clusters (Table 3). Almost without exception (24/26), violence struck directly at the child's home, family, or physical person: all semblance of protected space was obliterated. Fragments of artillery shells shattered living room windows, grazing a relative at the child's side. Armed, masked soldiers broke in to batter and arrest a father, to confiscate family possessions.

Erratic acts of street violence targeted Cluster 3W as well – a crazed soldier firing wildly in all directions, a hand-grenade exploding at a market square killing six. A few children were arrested by police, or were beaten unconscious by enemy gangs. A larger number bore forced witness to signs and remnants of gross terror – murdered neighbours lying in the street, tied corpses floating in the river. The vast majority (21/26) suffered persistent bombardment for months on end, often without access to adequate shelter.

Deprivation and persecution struck without exception (26/26). Hardship was most severe, owing in part to the lack of a personal protective network. The children in Cluster 3W, more often than others, were forced to the shelter of collective refugee camps in Croatia and Serbia, rather than to the homes or outhouses of distant relatives. Food was scarce; privacy non-existent; enemy war propaganda rampant.

Forced parental separation was widespread (22/26) and occasioned by life-threatening disruptions, much the same as in Cluster 2W. What distinguished the children of Cluster 3W was that nearly a quarter (6/26) were torn from the mother; and that the cause of separation from the father included imprisonment in concentration camps (7/26), perhaps the most extreme form of personal victimization. In addition, separation, almost without exception, was followed by family reunion while still in Bosnia.

> S, an 11-year-old only child, came from a village in eastern Bosnia. A day or two prior to the outbreak of the war, the mother and S set off for relatives in Sarajevo. Halfway, they were stopped at a military checkpoint and sent back.
>
> They fled to the mother's childhood town, to an apartment abandoned by a distant relative and already plundered. Early one morning in June 1992 five armed soldiers broke into the apartment. With a knife held at S's throat and a rifle in his stomach, they questioned him about his father. S cried but answered as instructed: he had no father. Furious, the soldiers threatened to kill him just the same unless the mother could pay a ransom.
>
> Once again they fled, now on foot to a town soon thereafter drawn into the war. They lived on the third floor of an apartment without cellar shelter. Artillery fire rained repeatedly for six months; they hid together under the kitchen table.

Profile War clusters differed significantly in socio-demographic character (Table 4).

TABLE 4
DIFFERENCE IN FREQUENCY (%) OF SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND VARIABLES WITH RESPECT TO PROFILE 'WAR' CLUSTERS

Background variables	% Total Population n=81[1]	% within War Clusters Cluster 1 War n=15	Cluster 2 War n=40	Cluster 3 War n=26	p-value
Age at war exposure					.022
0–6 years	51	67	60	27	
7–12 years	33	33	25	46	
13–20 years	16	0	15	27	
Sex					.609
girl	51	53	45	58	
boy	49	47	55	42	
Family size					.242
one child	16	27	10	19	
two children	59	67	58	58	
three or more children	25	6	32	23	
Ethnicity of child					.089
Bosniac (Bosnian Muslim)	38	13	35	58	
Bosnian Croat	15	13	18	12	
Bosnian Serb	5	0	10	0	
Romany	15	20	15	11	
mixed	27	53	22	19	
Ethnicity of child summarized					.020
Bosniac (Bosnian Muslim)	38	13	35	58	
other	62	87	65	42	
Social class of family					.000
farmer or unskilled worker	21	33	8	35	
skilled worker	48	7	60	54	
white collar or self employee	31	60	32	11	
Education of father					.008
primary school	18	20	13	24	
technical or vocational secondary	62	27	74	64	
theoretical secondary or university	20	53	13	12	
Education of mother					.018
primary school	30	33	23	39	
technical or vocational secondary	38	7	46	42	
theoretical secondary or university	32	60	31	19	
Home town ex-Yugoslavia					.068
country village – small town	58	29	62	65	
city	42	71	38	35	
War activity in home town					.000
relatively limited	19	57	17	0	
occupied without resistance	24	36	18	27	
violent combat	57	7	65	73	

[1] Total population reduced for variables: Education father n=79, Education mother n=80, Home town ex-Yugoslavia n=80, War activity home town n=80

Cluster 1W (the least traumatized) were the youngest: two-thirds were of pre-school age, none were in their teens. Socio-economically Cluster 1W was decidedly the most privileged. Their parents were predominantly

white-collar workers, more than half of whom had completed theoretically oriented study at secondary school or university level. Geographically Cluster 1W was over-represented by children from home towns where war activity was relatively limited.

The children in Cluster 3W (the most traumatized) were the oldest: half were of primary school age and a quarter in their teens. Ethnically there was a marked over-representation by children of Bosniac (Bosnian Muslim) background. Socio-economically Cluster 3W was the least privileged. A third of the parents were farmers or unskilled workers; white-collar professionals were uncommon. Few parents had pursued theoretical studies; twice as many had a formal education at primary school level only. Geographically Cluster 3W derived from the most precarious locations: three-quarters of the children came from home towns torn by intense military combat; none from towns relatively unscathed.

Of the socio-demographic characteristics found significant, three – child's age, Bosniac ethnic background and family's social class – proved to be independent of one another. Pair-wise cross tabulations were all statistically non-significant. Family's social class was tested further to determine its independent robustness. Stratified by ethnic background, child's age or war activity in home town, family's social class still proved significant.

Finally, child assignment to profile War clusters bore no relation whatsoever to profile Prior to War clusters ($p=1.0$).

Trauma-Stress in Exile

Swedish government policy aimed to distribute (Bosnian) refugees throughout the entire country. To this end, national legislation and funding guaranteed that, regardless of town placement, refugees granted asylum were assigned a special social worker who facilitated housing, medical controls, language training, school and day-care, as well as stipend support during the first 18–24 months after arrival.

Trauma-stress in exile included events both acutely traumatic and long-term stressful, but the traumatic events were too few to make that distinction meaningful. Instead the scoring profile Exile divided children's experience directly into three factors: *refugee related* hardship and discrimination, *war-related* separation and reunion, and *everyday-life* stress.

For the children in the study, total score on the profile Exile ranged from 0–9 points. Trauma-stress exposure accumulated in a patterned fashion such that three qualitatively distinct clusters became evident, each with its own type-story of exile and its own specific score range.

Cluster 1E (total score = 0–1, n = 18) experienced comparatively little or no stress while making first ground in Sweden (Table 5). Although exile inevitably imposes fundamental changes (of home, language, friends, climate and daily routines), this group reported few events of unexpected trauma-stress affecting the child.

TABLE 5
DIFFERENCE IN TOTAL SCORE AND SUB-SCORES ON PROFILE 'EXILE' IN RELATION TO EXILE CLUSTER ASSIGNMENT

	Cluster 1 Exile n=18 Means	Cluster 2 Exile n=45 Means	Cluster 3 Exile n=27 Means	p-value
Total Trauma-Stress in Exile	0.4	2.3	5.0	< .001
1. Refugee-related Hardship and Discrimination	0.3	1.0	2.2	< .001
2. War-related Separation and Reunion	0.1	1.1	1.8	< .001
3. Everyday-life Trauma-Stress	0.0	0.2	1.0	< .001

Cluster 2E (total score=2–3, n=45) reported singular events of trauma-stress, related either to the process of refugee reception or to delayed repercussions of the war (Table 5).

For a quarter of the children (11/45), ties with close friends and relatives, maintained throughout the war, were abruptly severed by flight to Sweden. Exile imposed the unfamiliar loneliness of a nuclear family. For a third of the children (14/45), arrival in Sweden occasioned sudden family reunion. After months of forced separation and longing, the father was once again part of the family. His intervening experience of front-line combat, concentration camp residence, or solitary asylum, however, weighed upon and complicated reunion.

Alternatively, trauma-stress exposure was refugee related (25/45). Events cited derived often from the gross inadequacy of Swedish reception facilities during the period when Bosnian refugees arrived *en masse*. Temporary sorting camps, intended as housing for a period of days, became family abodes for months, incurring physical discomfort and hardship. In addition, Swedish policy was not to question refugees as to ethnic or religious background. For some this occasioned tense co-residence with Bosnian ethnic 'enemies' or with culturally 'alien' Kosovo Albanians.

> E, five years old, her parents and older brother reached southern Sweden by bus and were immediately placed in a temporary sorting camp 1000 miles north.
> E's parents described barrack life as unexpectedly and harshly primitive: 14 persons of all ages were crowded into a single room. Adult war veterans smoked and paced the floor all night, infants screamed. The only help the nurse had to offer was earplugs. Eating facilities were cramped, each meal required standing in a queue for

> 1–2 hours outdoors in the cold. Sanitary facilities were grossly inadequate – '104 persons' were expected to share a single toilet. Furthermore, a large number of camp inhabitants were Kosovo-Albanians whose Balkan trauma seemed minor and whose need of refuge 'exaggerated'. E's parents regarded Albanians with suspicion, as 'culturally inferior and uneducated'.

Cluster 3E (total score = 4–9, n=27) experienced multiple trauma-stress after arrival in Sweden. Events arose not only from the repercussions of war and refugee status, as in Cluster 2E, but from everyday life as well (Table 5). The children were struck by severe illness, victimized by life threatening accidents, dismissed from school or day care. Parents divorced, and close relatives died.

At the same time the vast majority of these children also experienced war-related (21/27) and/or refugee-related (23/27) trauma-stress. The physical hardship and ethnic tension of sorting camps was often more intense than in Cluster 2E, owing mainly to delayed asylum processing. For a number of Cluster 3E children (8/27), the uncertainty of asylum period seemed to extend 'forever', as if 'nobody cared'.

> For D, nine years old, and his mother, arrival in Sweden brought the father back into the family after six months of forced separation. The father had been in a transport unit on the front-line and seen all too many dead. On a weekend leave he deserted, found D and mother in Belgrade and immediately fled.
>
> The period of asylum was frighteningly endless. D worried constantly that he and his parents would be sent back to Belgrade and that father would be put in prison or worse. His fear grew more intense each time Swedish police entered his refugee classroom to remove a child whose family awaited expulsion.
>
> After nearly two years, D and his family were finally awarded asylum and placed in Umeå. The mother was grossly pregnant. A week before delivery, something went wrong. She was rushed to the hospital but the child was already dead. D's parents vanished into sorrow.

In the description of Exile clusters above, acts of direct ethnic threat and harassment were omitted. Clinically (qualitatively), these events stood apart in that they so blatantly called in question Sweden as a place of refuge and provoked such explosive emotionality. Overt discrimination, however, did not increase in parallel with total profile Exile score (quantitative severity). Children exposed to open ethnic hostility (14/90) were as prevalent in Cluster 2E as in Cluster 3E.

Geographically, overt discrimination was not confined to any particular refugee camp or town of assigned placement. Ethnically, Romanies were over-represented among those afflicted (p=.007). Experiences reported included intentional fires set at camp barracks, demonstrations by armed skinheads at refugee sites, telephone and mail threats, and repeated bullying at school on grounds of ethnic identity. No child was physically injured.

TABLE 6
DIFFERENCE IN FREQUENCY (%) OF SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND VARIABLES WITH RESPECT TO PROFILE 'EXILE' CLUSTERS

Background variables	% Total Population n=90[1]	% within Exile Clusters Cluster 1 Exile n=18	Cluster 2 Exile n=45	Cluster 3 Exile n=27	p-value
Age at interview					.107
0–6 years	41	55	44	26	
7–12 years	38	28	42	37	
13–20 years	21	17	13	37	
Sex					.292
girl	49	61	51	37	
boy	51	39	49	63	
Family size					.007
one child	13	22	7	19	
two children	54	39	73	33	
three or more children	32	39	20	48	
Country of birth					.003
ex-Yugoslavia[2]	90	67	96	96	
Sweden	10	33	4	4	
Ethnicity of child					.000
Bosniac (Bosnian Muslim)	38	72	36	18	
Bosnian Croat	13	0	13	22	
Bosnian Serb	4	0	0	15	
Romany	16	6	11	30	
mixed	29	22	40	15	
Ethnicity of child summarized					.002
Bosniac (Bosnian Muslim)	38	72	36	18	
other	62	28	64	82	
Social class family					.133
farmer or unskilled worker	22	17	22	26	
skilled worker	47	55	36	59	
white collar or self employee	31	28	42	15	
Education of father					.047
primary school	22	39	11	28	
technical or vocat. secondary	57	44	59	64	
theoretical secondary or univ.	21	17	30	8	
Education of mother					.082
primary school	29	28	22	42	
technical or vocat. secondary	36	22	38	42	
theoretical secondary or univ.	35	50	40	16	
Home town ex-Yugoslavia					.640
country village – small town	58	67	52	62	
city	42	33	48	38	
War activity home town					.832
relatively limited	19	8	19	23	
occupied without resistance	24	33	21	23	
violent combat	57	58	60	54	
Refugee sorting camp north					.056
placed in	30	7	31	42	
not placed in	70	93	69	58	
Grounds for asylum					.714
quota refugee	11	11	14	7	
family-related refugee	22	28	23	15	
humanitarian refugee	67	61	63	78	
Assigned residence town – Sweden					.250
Umeå	59	67	64	45	
Nordmaling	13	11	9	22	
Vännäs	16	11	20	11	
Vindeln	12	11	7	22	

[1] Total population reduced for variables: Education father n=87, Education mother n=89, Home town ex-Yugoslavia n=80, War activity home town n=80, Refugee sorting camp north n=86, Grounds for asylum n=88

[2] included one child born while in flight in Germany

Profile Exile clusters were in many critical respects undifferentiated socio-demographically (Table 6). Neither child's age, family's social class, mother's level of formal education, nor war activity in home town (all of which differentiated profile War clusters) proved significant in exile. Grounds for asylum and town of assigned residence – crucial aspects of Swedish refugee reception – were likewise non-significant.

Cluster 1E (the least traumatized) were, however, over-represented by children without siblings and by children born in Sweden. Birth in Sweden by definition precluded repercussions of war-related stress. Ethnically, Cluster 1E were predominantly of Bosniac descent. The fathers had often limited formal education, frequently at primary school level only.

Cluster 3E (the most traumatized) were over-represented by families with three or more children. Ethnically nearly half of the children were of Bosnian Serb or Romany background. The fathers were predominantly technically or vocationally trained; few had pursued theoretical studies.

Of the socio-demographic variables found significant in differentiating Exile clusters, three – family size, country of birth and Bosniac ethnic background – proved to be independent of one another. Pair-wise, cross tabulations were all statistically non-significant.

Finally, child assignment to profile Exile clusters was not significantly related either to profile War or to profile Prior to War clusters ($p = .257$ and $p = .212$, respectively).

Discussion

In summary, the results of the study relate both to the method of questioning and to the stories derived from the Bosnian refugee children in Sweden. Regarding method, the findings support the value of a clinical approach in capturing traumatic experience, and present a working system for categorizing and ranking the unique material that thereby unfolds. From a descriptive vantage point, the results reveal that child trauma-stress exposure prior to, during, and after the war were unrelated; that the pre-war period was preponderantly good; and that differences in war and exile experience can be explained by socio-demographic background factors. In addition, the results show that Swedish refugee reception demonstrated both egalitarian and discriminatory tendencies.

The study was based upon a specific sample of Bosnian refugee children in Umeå. Nevertheless, as a descriptive picture and methodological approach, it would not be unreasonable to assume relevance to the approximately 25,000 Bosnian refugee children in Sweden more generally. Families seeking asylum from the war were 'randomly' distributed throughout the country. Children in the study originated from cities and towns all over Bosnia. They were also varied in ethnic, class and educational background, as well as age and degree of war exposure. Non-participation level was low.

At the same time, claims of general applicability demand caution. The study population was small and clinically, not experimentally, selected. The age of the children ranged from one month to 20 years, creating a wide variation in cognitive frames of reference, and thus in both the inner representation of life events and the capacity to report them. The total time of residence in Sweden could not be experimentally manipulated or standardized.

First and foremost, this paper presents evidence for the meaningfulness of a clinical approach in learning to know of child war and refugee trauma. The use of a semi-structured interview for capturing traumatic experience has at times been called in question.[22] Our results demonstrated that painful and terrifying events were reported and recounted with such detailed richness that differences in child exposure became apparent. Although trauma may unquestionably precipitate a strategy of silence, there remains at the same time a compelling need to cry out the crimes committed.[2,23] Our explicit focus on the child's experience may have facilitated this need to re-tell.

Methodologically, the central concern of this paper was to score and rank clinically derived stories without sacrificing their qualitative wholeness. The results suggest this was in fact accomplished. Total score and most sub-factor scores increased progressively as clinically (qualitatively) perceived severity increased. A 'mismatch' in quantitative and qualitative assessment was obvious only with regard to direct ethnic harassment in Sweden (profile Exile). Harassment ought to have predominated in the Exile cluster of the highest score range, but did not.

On a descriptive level, the results revealed that trauma-stress exposure prior to, during, and after the war were unrelated to one another. Child cluster assignment for each of these three periods was discrete and unconnected. Two possible explanations come immediately to mind: that traumatic experience was completely random, or that it was affected by socio-demographic factors operating differently during each time period. As discussed below, the results appear to leave this question unanswered for the period prior to the war; but to support a socio-demographic explanation for the periods of war and exile.

The most striking feature of stories from Prior to War was that few trauma-stress events were reported – the preponderant picture was of the 'good' life. Was this the 'reality' of the child's early years or a later-reconstruction?

Interviews were conducted in 1994–95, more than two years after the end of the prior to war period. In the intervening time, families had been thrown into war and exile. In retrospect, many normal life stresses of childhood (comrade taunting, school difficulties and change of residence) may well have seemed too insignificant to recount. The scales of experience were gauged at a completely different level.

Psychologically, there would also be reason to idealize the past, as a strategy to cope with and minimize the feelings of loss and victimization.

Memories of sun-lit copper roofs, laughing cousins and endless football created counter pictures to the brutality and ugliness of war.[8]

Still, stories of the good life in pre-war Bosnia were presented not as empty mantras, but as vivid and detailed accounts. Severe exceptions – sickness, accidents, separations and death – were disclosed. A small number of families even made it clear that the child's early life had been harsh and troublesome. Thus, it seems reasonable that profile Prior to War captured at least the severely stressful in the child's early history.

The paucity of events reported and the smallness of the population studied, however, made the identification of significant background variables difficult. The results shed little light on the socio-demographic dynamics of the pre-war period. At face value, an entire population was suddenly, and without preparation, thrown into civil strife. No identifiable social-economic-ethnic-group was systematically subjected to prior hardship, persecution, or other adversity.

Background variables were more readily at hand for understanding the dynamics of, and comparing exposure between, war and exile periods. The results revealed four factors in particular – ethnic background, social class, child age and family size – that impacted differently in wartime Bosnia than in refugee Sweden.

Ethnic background significantly affected trauma-stress exposure during the war. Bosniac children were over-represented in the cluster most severely traumatized. This was an inevitable consequence of the central goal of the war – to systematically expel Bosniacs and create 'pure' territory of other-ethnic composition.[24]

In Sweden, ethnic background also played a significant but different role: Bosniac children predominated among the least afflicted. Bosniacs constituted the largest single ethnic group among ex-Yugoslavians in Umeå. As such they shared experience and interpretation of the war with many of their countrymen. Bosnian Serbs, by contrast, were exceedingly few, and complained on interview of a double isolation – from countrymen as well as from Swedes. Further, Swedish media focused on Bosniac victimization, conferring upon them general public sympathy. Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Croats, whose personal fate may have been of the same degree, failed to enjoy such collective attentiveness. In fact, in the later stage of the war Bosnian Croats who arrived on passports issued in Croatia were 'mistakenly' regarded as Croatians by Swedish refugee authorities.[25] Their right to asylum was openly called in question; many were forcibly sent back to Croatia, which had never been their home.

The results showed that social class also influenced the intensity of child war exposure. The war in Bosnia often seems to have struck indiscriminate of class background, in that 'cleansing' was so systematic, its target so explicitly ethnic. In a study of refugee-camp children during the war, Goldstein, Wampler and Wise found no distinctions in exposure based on wealth.[26] However, their study population excluded by selection precisely

those not forced to the shelter of collective refugee centres – those with access to summer homes, friends and relatives, and personal contacts abroad. Our study, by contrast, revealed a clear social class gradient independent of ethnic background. The cost of securing the required papers and clearances for flight in certain phases of the war was well out of the reach of many.[27] The most privileged families appear to have enjoyed a greater number of, and more radical, options for gaining safety. A similar phenomenon has been identified in previous studies from the wars in Lebanon,[13] Afghanistan[14] and Croatia.[28]

Social class did not afford the same protective advantages in Sweden. Assignment to and treatment in refugee camps appears to have been 'blind' to class background. The time involved in processing asylum applications and awarding a town of residence was likewise unrelated to social status. After town placement, schooling, housing and stipend support were made available to all. The study disclosed no class bias with regard to child exile experience. This is worthy of attention. Sweden has a long tradition of central bureaucracy with an expressed egalitarian goal. However, the time span in question was relatively short: mean time from arrival to clinical interview was 1.5 years. To understand and gain privilege within the Swedish system may well demand a proficiency in language and familiarity with cultural patterns that takes more time to acquire.

Age group was the third characteristic that independently and significantly differentiated child experience in wartime Bosnia. Pre-school children dominated in the War cluster least exposed; primary school-age children and teenagers were over-represented in the cluster most targeted. Without doubt this reflected age group differences regarding total time in the war zone. Parents with pre-school children fled earlier from the Balkan region: mean time in war zone was 12 months for pre-school children, 18 months for primary school-age and 25 months for teenagers. Older children in Bosnia undoubtedly enjoyed a greater independence and freedom of movement than younger children. This wider range of movement resulted in increased exposure to the realities of war. Pre-school children were more likely to be protected by a 'parental shield' until home itself or family were directly targeted.[29]

In exile, on the other hand, age group failed to differentiate child experience. This was true regardless of whether infants born in Sweden were included or not. In contrast to time in war zone, time in Swedish refugee camps and total time in exile did not differ significantly among age groups. Whether older children also reduced their independence of movement in reaction to the unfamiliar, or whether movement (in a country at peace) caused no particular increase in traumatic exposure, cannot be determined from our results.

The fourth factor – nuclear family size – played no roll for trauma-stress exposure during the war. With one exception, families in the study contained only one to three children. In Bosnia, however, families were

frequently larger than their nuclear component: grandparents lived in the same apartment or on the ground floor in the same house, uncles and cousins on the same farmstead or next door. Child upbringing, socialization and protection were not parental responsibility alone. In several cases, grandparents were in fact the primary carers.

In Sweden, on the other hand, family size significantly influenced exile experience. Trauma-stress exposure increased progressively with the number of children. Structurally, Sweden presents as a highly individualized society, in which social facilities are geared to a nuclear composition of families and '1.5 children'. All too many children complicate standard solutions to apartment space, medical controls, expected levels of parental involvement in school and other child activities. Parents are supported more often by professional stand-ins (day-care staff, after-school teachers) than by relatives, a system awkward and unfamiliar for many refugees. Bosnian families were undoubtedly affected by Swedish social moulds: the greater the number of children, the greater the discrepancy between 'socially functional' and actual family size.

In summary, the non-relatedness of child cluster assignment for war and exile periods can be understood as a function, not of chance, but of differences in the dynamics and interplay of socio-demographic background variables.

Finally, the results of this paper cast light upon the question of 'equity of treatment' toward Bosnian families awarded asylum. Our findings point in opposite directions. On the one hand, a wide range of critical background characteristics – such as urban origin, grounds for asylum and assigned town of residence, as well as family social class – all failed to differentiate Exile clusters. Children of varying backgrounds and varying towns of destination were treated 'similarly'. Similarity of treatment of course says nothing about the quality of reception. Still, these results were somewhat surprising and remain open for interpretation.

On the other hand, treatment was clearly inequitable with regard to ethnic background. Romany children were over-represented among those personally targeted by ethnic threats and harassment. Further, the time involved to process asylum application, to award town of residence, was significantly longer among Romanies. Whether this reflected a policy of systematic discrimination, or resulted from the fact that Romanies in the study often originated from home towns (such as Belgrade), where grounds for asylum were less evident, cannot be determined.

Conclusions

The study bore with it a number of clinical implications:

A semi-structured interview of family and child afforded a detailed description of child trauma-stress exposure, gave meaning to the story as a whole, and established a framework and alliance for eventual further

therapeutic intervention. To what extent this approach also enhanced identification of children at risk will be addressed in a coming paper.

Factors impacting on or predisposing to trauma-stress varied sharply prior to war, during war, and after war in exile. Any serious evaluation of refugee children's life experience must address each of these periods separately.

For Bosnian refugee children, the period prior to war outbreak was preponderantly safe and good. Clinically this suggested a favourable starting point for short-term trauma-focused therapy.[5]

Regarding Swedish policy toward refugee reception, a number of simple conclusions can also be drawn. Long-term placement in temporary sorting camps should be avoided and overt harassment on ethnic grounds actively countered. To offer asylum to child refugees of war and ethnic cleansing constitutes a promise of absolute respect.

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