



## Emotional suppression in torture survivors: Relationship to posttraumatic stress symptoms and trauma-related negative affect



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### ABSTRACT

While clinical reports suggest that torture survivors may try to suppress their emotions during torture, little is known about the use of emotional suppression following torture. In this study, 82 refugees and asylum-seekers (including 33 torture survivors) completed self-report measures of trait suppression, PTSD symptoms and baseline negative affect before being exposed to images depicting scenes of interpersonal trauma. The use of suppression while viewing the images was indexed and negative affect was measured both immediately after viewing the images and following a five minute rest period. Findings indicated that torture survivors did not show higher rates of trait suppression or state emotional suppression during the experimental session compared to non-torture survivors. However, torture survivors who endorsed state suppression higher levels of distress, and this relationship was especially strong for those with more severe PTSD symptoms. In contrast, there was a negative relationship between state suppression and distress for non-torture survivors with high levels of PTSD symptoms. These findings suggest that, while torture exposure does not lead to greater use of suppression, it does influence the impact of suppression on emotional responses to stimuli.

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### 1. Introduction

Despite widespread international ratification of the United Nations Convention against Torture (United Nations, 1984), nearly three-quarters of countries engaged in state-sanctioned torture between 2009 and 2013 (Amnesty International, 2014). There is a substantial body of research indicating that torture has a powerful and enduring negative impact on mental health (Man Shrestha et al., 1998; Carlsson et al., 2006). Torture is the strongest risk factor associated with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in conflict-affected and displaced populations (Steel et al., 2009), and refugees who have been tortured evidence higher rates of psychological disorders than those who have not been tortured (Basoglu et al., 1994; Man Shrestha et al., 1998; Van Ommeren et al., 2001), even after controlling for exposure to other types of

traumatic events (Silove et al., 2002). Despite this, little is known about the specific psychological factors underlying posttraumatic stress responses in torture survivors. Understanding these mechanisms may facilitate the development of effective interventions specifically tailored to the needs of torture survivors.

The objective of torture is to subjugate, mentally defeat, terrorize, and secure compliance with political goals (Quiroga and Jaranson, 2008). Accordingly, torture is often enacted to inflict psychological damage (Turner and Horst-Unsworth, 1990). Clinical accounts suggest that many torture survivors suppress their thoughts and emotions, or even dissociate, as an immediate coping strategy to manage the experience of torture (Morris and Silove, 1992; Quota et al., 1997; Punamaki et al., 2008). Avoidance of internal experiences may be considered to be adaptive peri-traumatically, but, persistent avoidance post-trauma may prevent emotional processing of the experience, and contribute to the development or maintenance of posttraumatic stress (Silove, 1996; Punamaki et al., 2005).

Research has linked both habitual and instructed emotional

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suppression to trauma-related psychopathology. Accordingly, trauma survivors with high levels of PTSD symptoms are more likely to use emotional suppression to manage their distress (Ehlers et al., 1998; Roemer et al., 2001; Amstadter and Vernon, 2008; Seligowski et al., 2015), and experience increased intrusive memories of trauma-related cues when instructed to suppress their reactions to negative stimuli in the laboratory (Shipherd and Beck, 1999; Amstadter and Vernon, 2006). It is paradoxical that attempting to reduce immediate reactions to provocation appears to be associated with more intrusions and greater distress. Wegner's (1994) ironic control theory posits that suppression leads to the activation of an executive operating process that searches for distractors to prevent unwanted thoughts or affective states from entering awareness. In parallel, a monitoring process searches for indications of the failure of mental control (i.e., the occurrence of the unwanted state). This monitoring process is ironic as it is seeking out instances of the internal experience that the individual is trying to avoid, and accordingly can provide a theoretical explanation for the prominence of these experiences during suppression. In applying this to trauma survivors, Wenzlaff and Wegner (2000) have argued that the post-suppression rebound precipitated by the suppression of trauma-related internal experiences often leads to further avoidance, ultimately resulting in the cycle of intrusive and avoidance symptoms characteristic of PTSD. Given that torture is associated with severe posttraumatic stress reactions, and that torture survivors may be especially likely to engage in emotional suppression during and after torture, they may be particularly vulnerable to the paradoxical effects of suppression on posttraumatic distress and symptomatology.

Studies that have investigated the use of suppression in trauma survivors have tended to examine the relationship between trait suppression and PTSD symptoms (Ehlers et al., 1998; Roemer et al., 2001; Seligowski et al., 2015). While these studies have typically demonstrated a robust association between PTSD and suppression, they have been limited by cross-sectional designs, relying on participant reports of global suppression use, and linking this to overall PTSD symptom severity. In contrast, experimental studies typically instruct participants to engage in suppression, and examine how these instructions impact responses to trauma-related stimuli (Shipherd and Beck, 1999; Amstadter and Vernon, 2006). While these studies have greater internal validity, their external validity with respect to the day-to-day use of suppression is limited.

To overcome these limitations, we exposed tortured and non-tortured refugees to emotional images in a laboratory setting, measuring negative affect and the use of suppression via a standardized assessment prior to and after viewing the images. This methodology allowed us to investigate the in-the-moment use of emotional suppression, and the immediate impact of this strategy on psychological distress. Based on empirical evidence from research with trauma-exposed groups and clinical observations with torture survivors, we hypothesized that: (1) torture survivors would report greater trait suppression than non-torture survivors; (2) torture survivors would report greater use of state suppression while viewing the images compared to non-torture survivors, and that this pattern would be enhanced in torture survivors with high levels of PTSD symptoms; and (3) emotional suppression would be associated with greater increases in negative affect for torture survivors relative to non-torture survivors, with this pattern being enhanced in torture survivors with high levels of PTSD symptoms.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were 82 refugees who were recruited via advertisements at refugee services and community organisations. Two-thirds of the sample was male ( $N=54$ , 65.9%), with a mean age of 34.1 years ( $SD=9.5$ ). Participants came from a variety of countries of origin including Iran ( $N=45$ , 54.9%), Afghanistan ( $N=10$ , 12.2%), Sri Lanka ( $N=8$ , 9.8%), Iraq ( $N=7$ , 8.5%), and others such as Serbia, Bhutan and Nigeria ( $N=12$ , 14.5%). Participants had been in Australia for a mean of 2.5 years ( $SD=3.6$ ), and most participants held temporary or bridging visas ( $N=69$ , 83.1%). Participants had been exposed to a mean of 8.6 types of traumatic events ( $SD=3.4$ ), with approximately 40% of the sample having been tortured ( $N=33$ , 40.2%).

### 2.2. Measures and materials

#### 2.2.1. Potentially traumatic events

Exposure to potentially traumatic events was measured using the Harvard Trauma Questionnaire (HTQ; Mollica et al., 1992). The HTQ indexes 16 types of traumatic events that are experienced by refugees. This scale has been used widely with refugee groups (Steel et al., 1999; Shoeb et al., 2007). The HTQ yields a total count of the number of types of traumatic events to which a refugee has been exposed (range=0–16).

#### 2.2.2. PTSD symptoms

We assessed PTSD symptoms using the PTSD Symptom Scale – Interview Version (PSSI-I; Foa et al., 1993). This 17-item semi-structured interview measures DSM-IV symptoms of PTSD on a 4-point scale (0=*not at all*, 3=*5 or more times per week/very much*). For the current study, we included four additional items to measure new symptom criteria included in the DSM-5. We summed ratings on individual items to create a total PTSD symptom score that was used in this study, with this scale demonstrating strong internal consistency ( $\alpha=0.93$ ). This scale has been previously used with refugees (e.g., Pfeiffer and Elbert, 2011).

#### 2.2.3. Trait suppression

We assessed trait suppression in the current study using the White Bear Suppression Inventory (WBSI; Wegner and Zanakos, 1994). This measure consists of 15 items that index the extent to which individuals attempt to suppress their internal affective experiences. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1=*Strongly disagree*, 5=*Strongly agree*). Studies indicate that the WBSI has good psychometric properties (Muris et al., 1996). We summed responses to create a measure of trait suppression, which demonstrated sound internal consistency ( $\alpha=0.87$ ). This scale has been used across cultural groups (e.g., Altin and Gencoz, 2009).

#### 2.2.4. State suppression

Participants' use of emotional suppression in the experimental session was indexed using three items developed for this study (e.g., "I tried to push my feelings away while watching the images"). Items were rated on a 5-point scale (1=*completely disagree*, 5=*completely disagree*). These items demonstrated strong internal consistency ( $\alpha=0.81$ ).

#### 2.2.5. Negative affect

We measured negative affect using individual items indexing feeling upset, afraid, tense and angry at three time-points in this study (prior to and immediately after viewing the images and after a five-minute recovery period). These items were measured on a 5-point scale (1=*not at all*, 5=*extremely*).

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