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# Traumatic Stress Among Sexual and Gender Minority Refugees From the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia Who Fled to the European Union

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In 2015, more than 600,000 individuals from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan fled to Europe in search of protection. Among the most understudied of this population are individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ). These individuals have not only fled war but also violence due to their sexual and/or gender identities. At the same time, LGBTQ individuals from other parts of the Middle East, Central and South Asia, and North Africa have also fled to Europe to escape persecution. The purpose of this multimethod study was to understand how traumatic stress shaped the experiences of 38 LGBTQ individuals who fled to Austria ( $n = 19$ ) and the Netherlands ( $n = 19$ ) from these regions. We assessed participants for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and conducted qualitative interviews to understand their migration experiences. Of the 37 participants assessed for PTSD, 33 (89.2%) reported that their most distressing event occurred prior to migration. For the 24 (64.9%) participants who met criteria for a provisional diagnosis of PTSD, 15 reported that the precipitating event was related to their sexual and/or gender identities and 9 reported that it was related to another type of event (e.g., war). Grounded theory was used to analyze qualitative data. Themes demonstrated that participants encountered targeted violence and abuse throughout migration and upon their arrival in Austria and the Netherlands. Findings indicate that LGBTQ refugees may be vulnerable to ongoing trauma from other refugees and immigration officials. Recommendations for protecting and supporting LGBTQ refugees during humanitarian emergencies are provided.

In 2015, approximately 650,000 individuals from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan fled to Europe in search of protection, comprising more than half of all first-time asylum applications to the European Union that year (Eurostat, 2016). Among the most vulnerable of these refugees were those who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ). Official figures do not exist, but reports indicate that significant numbers of LGBTQ people from the Middle East, North Africa, and Central and South Asia have sought asylum in the European Union in recent years (European Union Agency for Fundamental Human Rights [FRA], 2017). Although many refugees are vulnerable to experiencing traumatic events, LGBTQ refugees are at specific risk due to their sexual orientation and gender identity (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2015). Excess exposure to traumatic events among

LGBTQ populations has been attributed to prejudice and discrimination, which is frequently referred to as minority stress (Alessi, Meyer, & Martin, 2013).

The purpose of this multimethod study was to investigate how traumatic stress shaped the migration experiences of LGBTQ refugees from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) as well as Central and South Asia who fled to Austria and the Netherlands. We focused on these two countries because they have accepted among the highest numbers of refugees in the European Union. In 2015 alone, approximately 86,000 people applied for asylum in Austria and 43,000 in the Netherlands (Eurostat, 2016). Understanding the experiences of LGBTQ refugees is critical because their mental health and psychosocial needs are distinct from those of the general refugee population (Rumbach & Knight, 2014; UNCHR, 2015). Ultimately, information reported in this study has the potential to influence humanitarian assistance programs for LGBTQ refugees.

Typically, the migration process is understood as “movement from point A to point B, generally focusing on permanent transnational resettlement” (Zimmerman, Kiss, & Hossain, 2011, p. 2). However, with the rise of globalization, human migration has become much more complex (Zimmerman et al., 2011). To capture this complexity, Zimmerman and colleagues (2011) conceptualized migration as nonsequential

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phases (predeparture, travel, destination, interception, and return) into which individuals can enter numerous times. Such a framework can be used to trace the traumatic experiences of LGBTQ refugees over time.

Predeparture involves the period before migration from the country of origin, in which individuals are likely to have experienced traumatic events that could impact their mental and physical health throughout migration (Zimmerman et al., 2011). For LGBTQ refugees specifically, the predeparture phase can be particularly dire. To date, same-sex sexual activity is criminalized in 72 countries around the world, many of which are located in the MENA region as well as parts of Central and South Asia (Carroll & Mendos, 2017). Traditional religious doctrine pervades many of the laws and customs in these regions, and it is sometimes used to justify violence and discrimination against LGBTQ-specific individuals (Rehman & Polymenopoulou, 2013). Studies have shown that LGBTQ individuals in these regions may experience prolonged and multiple forms of trauma, including physical and sexual assault, corrective rape, psychological abuse, blackmail, forced conversion therapy, public shaming, and social ostracism (Alessi, Kahn, & Chatterji, 2016; Alessi, Kahn, & Van Der Horn, 2017; Hopkinson et al., 2017; Shidlo & Ahola, 2013). Trauma exposure tends to begin in early childhood, is pervasive, and occurs at the interpersonal, community, and societal levels (Alessi et al., 2017). Although LGBTQ individuals who reside in the Global West experience similar events, those living in countries without LGBTQ rights may lack adequate resources and protections. For example, attempts to seek assistance from family, community members, the police, and government officials can lead to further victimization (Alessi et al., 2017; Kahn, Alessi, Kim, Oliveri, & Woolner, 2017), leaving some LGBTQ individuals to feel they have no choice but to flee.

The travel phase comprises the period of transit between the country of origin and the destination location (Zimmerman et al., 2011). After fleeing, LGBTQ refugees may travel to other countries before they reach their destination (Shakhshari, 2014). However, these countries may still be hostile toward sexual and gender minority individuals, exposing LGBTQ refugees to continued violence and forcing them to hide until they can travel to a safer country. Further, LGBTQ refugees may be exposed to the dangers encountered by the general population of refugees during the travel phase, such as communicable diseases, transportation via closed containers, and the use of unsafe boats (Zimmerman et al., 2011). In fact, more than 1,200 migrants have drowned on the voyage from Turkey to Greece or Bulgaria since 2015 and others have been exposed to kidnapping and exploitation by smugglers (UNHCR, 2017).

The destination phase refers to temporary or long-term settlement in the new location (Zimmerman et al., 2011). Although host countries, such as those in the European Union, may offer some measure of security for LGBTQ refugees, the mechanisms used to assist these individuals may place them at further risk of trauma (Rumbach & Knight, 2014). For example, media reports have indicated that hundreds of LGBTQ refugees from MENA

have experienced harassment and violence by other refugees in European migration camps (Associated Press, 2016). Moreover, LGBTQ refugees may encounter discrimination and harassment from refugee service providers, translators, and immigration officials (FRA, 2017; UNHCR, 2015), and they may feel alienated from the mainstream LGBTQ community because of their race or ethnicity, religion, and/or immigration status. Hiding from this community, along with fears of discrimination by members of the diaspora and host community, may exacerbate traumatic stress (Alessi, 2016).

The interception phase includes situations in which migrants are temporarily detained because of immigration control laws, whereas the return phase occurs when individuals return to their countries of origin either temporarily or without plans to leave again (Zimmerman et al., 2011). In detention, LGBTQ individuals may experience sexual and physical assault as well as harassment by staff and other detainees (Tabak & Levitan, 2013). Deportation to the country of origin may re-expose LGBTQ individuals to the same threats that led them to flee in the first place (Alessi et al., 2017). To fill a knowledge gap, we examined the traumatic experiences of LGBTQ refugees who fled from MENA and Central and South Asia to Austria and the Netherlands. This study was guided by the following research question: How does traumatic stress shape the migration experiences of these individuals?

## Method

### Participants

The final sample consisted of 38 individuals between the ages of 18 and 53 years ( $M = 30.26$  years;  $SD = 6.96$ ). Of these participants, 20 had been granted asylum, 15 had an asylum case pending, 1 was granted temporary status, and 2 were denied asylum. Participants had resided in Europe between 2 months and 4 years ( $Mdn = 20$  months). They described their nationality as Syrian ( $n = 10$ ), Iranian ( $n = 7$ ), Iraqi ( $n = 5$ ), Lebanese ( $n = 4$ ), Egyptian ( $n = 3$ ), Pakistani ( $n = 3$ ), Jordanian ( $n = 2$ ), Chechen ( $n = 1$ ), Palestinian ( $n = 1$ ), Somali ( $n = 1$ ), and Tajik ( $n = 1$ ). Participants resided in Vienna in Austria ( $n = 19$ ) or Amsterdam in the Netherlands ( $n = 19$ ) or in nearby cities and towns, and they identified as gay ( $n = 24$ ), transgender female ( $n = 5$ ), lesbian ( $n = 3$ ), bisexual ( $n = 3$ ), queer or gender nonconforming ( $n = 2$ ), and transgender male ( $n = 1$ ). The majority of participants (89.5%) were raised in the Muslim religion, whereas the remainder (10.5%) were brought up in the Christian or Druze religions.

### Procedure

We used purposive sampling to recruit participants from two community organizations that provide social services and immigration-related assistance to LGBTQ refugees. One organization was located in Vienna and the other in Amsterdam. A trained research assistant at each of these organizations

informed individuals about the study during service visits. These research assistants spoke English and Arabic, which helped facilitate trust and allow for “culture brokering” between the researchers and participants (Denov, 2010). In addition, we gave participants the opportunity to refer other individuals for study participation. To take part in the study, individuals had to (a) be at least 18 years old, (b) have resided in Austria or the Netherlands for at least 1 week, (c) identify as LGBTQ, and (d) have migrated to Europe from the Middle East, North Africa, or a predominantly Islamic country. Potential participants were prescreened by the two research assistants, and we (EA and SK) also screened those who met eligibility criteria on the day of the interview. Individuals who reported suicidal ideation, severe depression, or overwhelming anxiety were not eligible for participation as we were concerned that this might exacerbate existing symptomatology. However, none of the participants we screened were in acute distress. To take part in the study, participants had to provide informed consent. Individuals who did not speak English had the consent form translated to them by an interpreter who provided participants with the opportunity to ask questions about the study. The institutional review boards of both Rutgers and McGill universities approved all study protocols.

## Measures

**Overview and demographic information.** Participants began the interview by providing demographic information (age, sexual orientation, gender identity, and month and year of arrival in Austria or the Netherlands). Then, they completed a self-report measure of PTSD and semistructured qualitative interview. The self-report measure allowed for examination of the most distressing event associated with PTSD, and the interview provided in-depth understanding of participants’ traumatic experiences beyond the most distressing event.

**PTSD.** We used the Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Checklist for *DSM-5* with Criterion A (PCL-5; Weathers et al., 2015) to assess for PTSD. Participants began by identifying (a) their most distressing event; (b) whether it involved actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence; and (c) whether it happened to them directly, they witnessed it, or they learned about it. The interviewers recorded participants’ information in the form of a brief narrative. Participants were then told to keep their most distressing event in mind as they completed the PCL-5. This measure consists of 20 items that correspond to PTSD symptoms (Criteria B–E) according to the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)*; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Participants indicated how much they have been bothered by their symptoms in the past month on a 5-point scale ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 4 (*extremely*). To receive a provisional diagnosis of PTSD, participants had to give each endorsed item a rating of at least a 2 (*moderately*); additionally, they had to endorse at least one item from Criterion B (Items 1–5), one item from Criterion C

(Items 6–7), two items from Criterion D (Items 8–14), and two items from Criterion E (Items 15–20; Weathers et al., 2015).

Of the 22 English-speaking participants, 21 completed the PCL-5; 1 participant chose not to do so. The PCL-5 has been shown to have very good internal consistency and test–retest reliability, as well as evidence of discriminant and construct validity (Blevins, Weathers, Davis, Witte, & Domino, 2015). To date, an Arabic language version of the PCL-5 does not exist; therefore, we developed one through translation and back-translation. We followed protocol developed by Norris, Aroian, and Nickerson (2011) to ensure fidelity of meaning in both the English and Arabic languages. This version was administered to 13 Arabic-speaking participants. The interpreter provided verbal translation of the PCL-5 for the two participants who spoke Farsi and one who spoke Pashto. We calculated Cronbach’s alpha values for all participants who completed the PCL-5 (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .91$ ) as well as values for those who completed the English (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .92$ ) and Arabic (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .86$ ) versions.

**Semistructured interview.** The questions included in the semistructured interview were informed by previous studies of LGBTQ refugees (Alessi et al., 2017; Kahn et al., 2017). The interview protocol was designed to capture stressful and traumatic events related to sexual orientation and gender identity as well as migration (predeparture to arrival at destination). Participants were asked the following questions: (a) “What was it like to be LGBTQ in your country of origin?,” (b) “What factors motivated you to flee?,” (c) “Tell us about any experiences of violence or discrimination during the migration process,” and (d) “What was it like for you when you first arrived in Austria or the Netherlands?” Probes allowed for elaboration of participants’ experiences.

We (EA and SK) conducted face-to-face interviews with all participants. The interviews occurred between June and July 2017, lasted 1–2.5 hr, and were conducted in a private location. We conducted 22 interviews in English, 13 in Arabic, 2 in Farsi, and 1 in Urdu. An interpreter was present during interviews that were not conducted in English. Each interview was audio recorded and professionally transcribed. Following the interview, participants received €40 (Euros) for their time and effort. We monitored our biases during the interview process by keeping field notes and conducting debriefings before and after each interview (Padgett, 2017). For example, we assumed that participants would encounter severe trauma throughout migration, and we thus wanted to ensure that these assumptions did not prevent us from identifying a range of perspectives. Debriefings were also used to pinpoint migratory processes in need of further exploration (e.g., how participants navigated identity issues on the migration trail).

## Data Analysis

**PCL-5.** We determined whether each participant met criteria for a provisional diagnosis of PTSD. Then, a chi-square

test was performed to examine the association between the language in which the PCL-5 was completed (English vs. Arabic) and a provisional diagnosis of PTSD (no vs. yes).

**Interview data.** We analyzed qualitative data using the principles of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). These methods were chosen for their ability to explain the processes involved in participants' migration journeys. Constructivist grounded theory invites the "discovery" of reality that may come about from researcher-participant interactions (Charmaz, 2014). In this study, we used the migration framework (Zimmerman et al., 2011) as a sensitizing concept to guide our analysis. However, the use of the constant comparative method left us open to further discovery during the analytic process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This method was used to identify themes applicable to all participants as well as those pertaining to particular groups (individuals from specific countries of origin, transgender participants). We (EA, SK, LW, and RV) began the analysis by independently coding four transcripts and then met to create a preliminary list of codes. After analyzing four more transcripts, we met again to refine and refute codes, which allowed us to move toward selective coding. Finally, we coded the remaining transcripts and met to develop the final set of codes and themes.

We used a number of strategies to enhance methodological rigor. First, the presence of the third and fourth authors (LW and RV) during the data analytic process brought a fresh perspective to the study. Their understanding of the data had not been shaped by the interviews as it had been for those authors (EA and SK) who participated in that process. Hence, they (LW and RV) were able to draw attention to our potential biases. Second, we engaged in negative case analysis by searching for evidence that did not support specific codes and themes (Padgett, 2017). This was helpful for identifying experiences or processes that were not common to the majority of participants, thus illuminating unexpected turns in the data. Third, we engaged in data triangulation by comparing interview data with memos and PCL-5 results, helping to ensure that we had a more complex understanding of the data. Finally, we kept a detailed audit trail to keep track of raw data and record all processes and decisions involved in the analytic process (Padgett, 2017).

## Results

### PTSD

Of the 37 participants who completed the PCL-5, the majority (89.2%) reported that their most distressing event occurred during the predeparture phase, whereas 10.8% reported that it occurred during travel or while they resided in a country prior to their arrival in Austria or the Netherlands. More than half (64.9%) of participants reported that their most distressing event was precipitated by their sexual orientation and/or gender identity (a list of participants' most distressing events is available in the online Supplementary Material). There were 24

participants (64.9%) who met criteria for a provisional diagnosis of PTSD. Of these, 15 reported that the precipitating event was related to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, while 9 reported that it was related to another type of event (e.g., sudden death of a family member, living in a war zone; for more information about the events associated with a provisional diagnosis of PTSD see Supplementary Material online). In terms of language, 13 participants spoke English, 9 spoke Arabic, and 2 spoke Farsi. The association between the PCL-5 (English vs. Arabic) and a provisional diagnosis of PTSD was not significant,  $\chi^2(1, N = 34) = 0.19, p = .727$  (Fisher's Exact Test used).

### Qualitative Data

We identified the following themes from the qualitative data: reasons for migration from the country of origin (predeparture), pursuing safe haven (travel and interception), and arriving in a land of contradictions (destination). For each theme, we developed subthemes to describe the stressors that participants experienced throughout their journeys (see Figure 1 for an illustration). We protected participants' confidentiality by using pseudonyms and not connecting their demographic information with their countries of origin.

### Reasons for Forced Migration From the Country of Origin

**Fleeing violence, abuse, and shattered family bonds.** Environments steeped in traditional values and conservative religious beliefs shaped participants' predeparture experiences. Individuals who violated gender norms or engaged in same-sex relationships described that family and community members, state actors, and militia groups subjected them to physical violence and psychological abuse. These experiences ultimately made it unbearable for participants to continue living in their countries of origin. Nonetheless, for approximately half of the sample, it was abuse and rejection by family members that featured prominently in their narratives. For example, Janie, a transgender female participant, reported that her family began to abuse her during her childhood. To hide her gender nonconforming behavior from others, her family did not allow her to leave home or attend school:

All my family members, they abuse me and beat me all the time. All the time, everybody. And they were asking, why you are moving your hand? You don't have to move your hand. Why are you walking like that? You have to put your hand like a man . . .

Similar to Janie, others reported that multiple family members were involved in perpetrating abuse toward them, with fathers, brothers, and male relatives playing a significant role. One participant, Misam, reported that after her brother discovered she was a lesbian, he became violent, taking away her cell phone and threatening to call the police. She believed that her brother most likely convinced her father to turn against her, ultimately expelling her from the family: "My father is an

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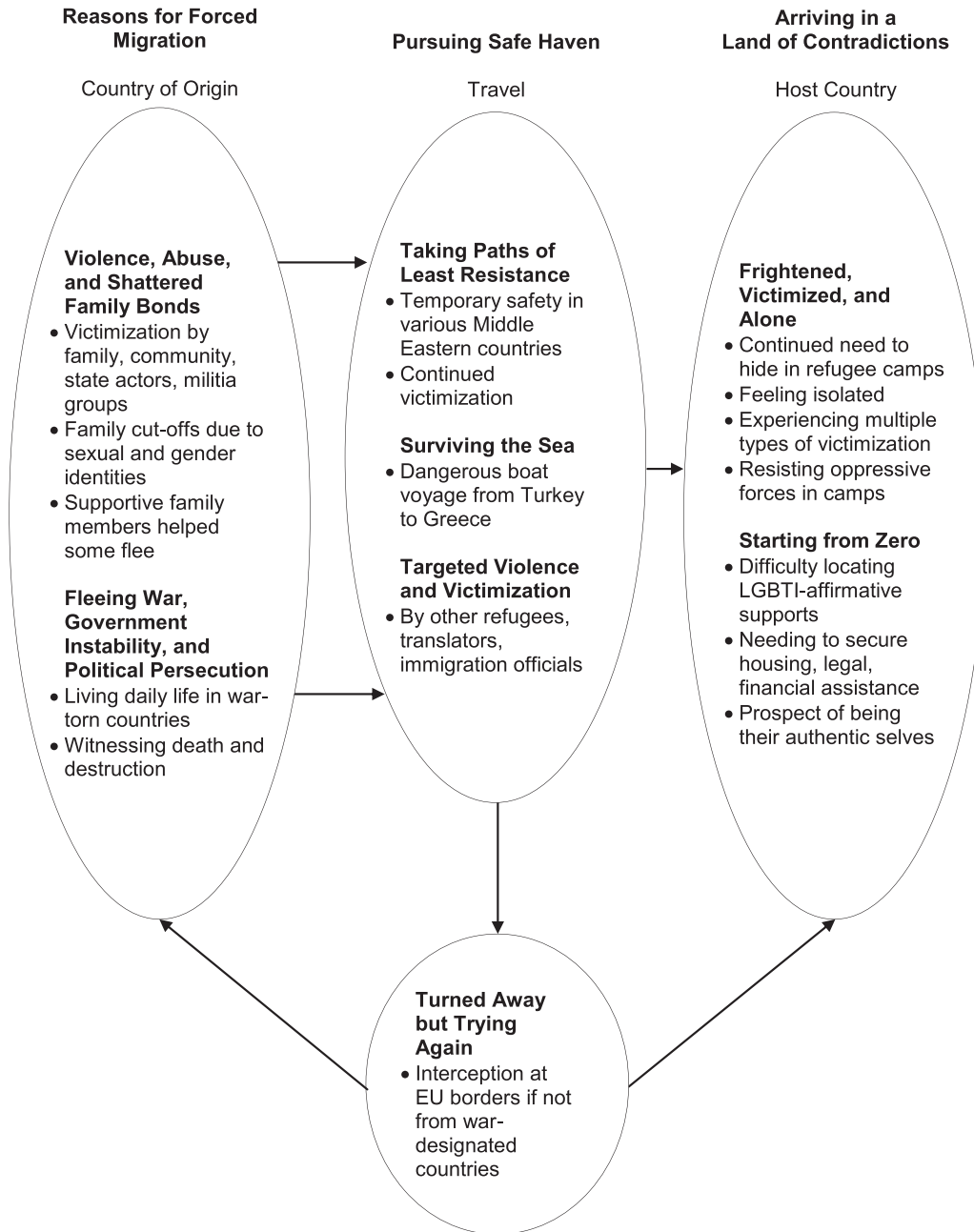


Figure 1. An illustration of themes and subthemes that explain how traumatic stress shaped the migration processes of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) refugees from the Middle East, North Africa, and Central and South Asia who fled to Austria and the Netherlands.

educated person. Sometimes I think if my brother didn't react that much, if he didn't make all that problem, such a huge thing, maybe . . ."

Losing the support of their families was exceptionally difficult for participants. For example, after the police detained Adam, his family discovered that he was gay. Although being detained by the police disturbed him, it was the subsequent loss of his family connection that was most devastating. In his words, "My life was destroyed when they arrested me because I'm gay . . . it's not because I'm working as a prostitute or

something. It's because I'm gay." Adam further explained what it was like for him to constantly hide his sexual orientation:

You have to live with 100 faces, one with your family, one with your friends, one with your colleague . . . so you have to hide yourself. You have to be careful. It's like you been in hell or jail. Jail inside you . . . so it's a . . . big shame in my country, especially the Islamic background. It's a very big shame to be gay.

Vonnie, a gay male participant, shared that Christianity also perpetuates shame about homosexuality in the Middle East:

“People talk about Islamic influence. There is also a Christian influence where also in the church it’s all about, that’s a sin what you do. It’s not [God’s] will.”

Although 13 participants (34.2%) managed to conceal their sexual orientation or gender identities from their families, they still lived in constant fear of being discovered. Mohammed, a gay male participant, reported that after he began a sexual relationship with one of his male friends, the friend threatened to tell the people closest to Mohammed that he was gay. Still affected by the psychological aftermath of having been sexually abused in childhood, Mohammed did not feel that he could endure this type of exposure:

I couldn’t bear it anymore . . . I had to die or get out. And I chose to get out . . . I lived an unhappy and unreal life. It was very exhausting to play hetero to everybody, as if I owe them something . . . it’s a “we culture,” so everybody is responsible to everybody . . . a lot of traumatic experiences in between . . . in the end it was too much.

Nonetheless, not all participants reported strained relationships with their families. In fact, five participants reported that their family members helped them escape from their countries of origin because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. In one such case, Kenan’s mother helped smuggle him out of the country after his relatives called the police when they discovered that he was gay. He expressed, “I was hiding in the home and my mother, she was organizing [the escape].”

**Fleeing war, government instability, and political persecution.** Participants from Syria and Iraq ( $n = 14$ ) described different reasons for flight than those who migrated from other countries in the MENA region or Asia (e.g., Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Pakistan). Although individuals from Syria and Iraq experienced persecution based on their sexual and/or gender identities, the challenges of living in a war-torn country factored heavily in their decision to flee. Adnan, who identified as transgender male, discussed what it was like to live in a war-torn country:

So in [my country of origin], how we managed to not die? Because we were thinking that some people they were just bombed inside their place, inside their house . . . so going out would not prevent you—or staying inside—would not prevent you from being killed.

Another participant, Zayd, a gay male participant, described his experience helping people who had been injured in the war:

[It] was pretty traumatizing [pause] to see all these dead people. Especially there was this guy, like he came and . . . was bleeding from here to here—[you] can just see like there is a hole and you can just look through it. It was very extreme. And this guy, like, he hold my hand and saying don’t let me die, don’t let me die. And I just passed out.

Vladimir had to hide his sexual orientation while he was in his country of origin, but he reported that he liked living there.

He had a good job, a boyfriend, and was part of an underground gay community. However, it was his affiliation with a movement that publically resisted the regime through social media that led him to flee: “I went to [member of the regime] and I apologized to them, and they told me it’s the last time. I decided after that to flee.”

## Pursuing Safe Haven

**Taking paths of least resistance.** Before arriving in Europe, 25 (65.8%) participants fled to other Middle Eastern countries first because the borders of these countries were relatively uncomplicated to cross. Although participants were finally safe from family and community members who had once abused them as well as from the perils of war, they were still at risk of experiencing trauma involving their sexual and gender identities. For example, Betty, a transgender woman, went to live with a family member in another Middle Eastern country when she was 13 years old to escape abuse perpetrated by her family. After her arrival, she engaged in sex work, which left her vulnerable to violence by community members: “I was kidnapped there, and this group took me to the desert. And one of them, he was kind of a hero and he set me free.”

Among the 25 participants who fled to other Middle Eastern countries before arriving in Europe, 22 (57.9%) either ended up in Turkey after having traveled to other Middle Eastern countries or traveled directly to Turkey after fleeing their countries of origin. Although Turkey provided a semblance of safety for these participants, they realized that it was not enough for them to live an authentic life. Ahmed, a gay male participant, acknowledged that although fleeing to Turkey protected him from his family, who he feared would hurt him because he was gay, he and his boyfriend still encountered difficulties there: “We faced a lot of problems in public, when we were in the street, when we were in the café or the bar or everywhere, we face a lot of problem like discrimination and humiliating words.” To avoid being targeted, participants explained that they had to hide their sexual orientation or gender identity. For example, Tamer, a gay male participant, reported, “My boss didn’t know I was gay. Nobody there. I was just living straight . . . I was just going to the bars at night, but in the morning just acting straight.” Unlike Tamer, Ali, a gay male participant, decided it was best to isolate himself as much as possible: “I didn’t feel security there. I was just staying at home. If I wanted to go out, I’m just going to buy food or something.”

**Surviving the sea.** Regardless of whether participants migrated to Turkey for an extended period of time or were there for only a few days, 20 participants paid smugglers to take them by boat from Turkey to Greece. These participants did not contemplate the dangers inherent in the journey by sea, no matter how aware they were of the risks. As Haidar, a bisexual male participant, explained, the risk began well before he boarded the boat:



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After 2 hours of walking, we reached the water. There was a boat waiting for us. We went inside this boat and someone came to turn the boat on. The boat was not working . . . so the people were afraid and they started to leave the boat. But the smuggler they came with their guns and they threatened the people . . . and they told them you don't leave . . . and then [the people] went back to the boat and they were lucky, the boat turned on.

Participants expressed that during this point in the migration process, they felt just like any other refugee; that is, they were desperate for a safe place to land. Marwa, a queer woman, explained:

You talk to the people with you and you don't think about it, you don't go out and look at yourself from another perspective. No, this is who you are. You are a refugee trying to escape . . . I never knew how many hours we were going to spend on the sea, or what. You just hear that people are crossing on the sea.

Individuals who traveled by sea to Greece with family members, partners, or friends relied on these people for support. For example, Marwa held her brother's hand the entire time whereas Haidar looked to his friends to distract him. He shared the following: "We were 29 people on this boat. Most of the people were women and children and they were crying and shouting. But me and my friends, we were all together talking, just trying to . . . forget the time." Traveling by boat with one's family or friends could still not protect participants from the risks involved with migrating to Greece. Alex, a gay male participant, shared his experience about his journey from Turkey to Greece:

And the boat [sank]. I told you I'm a lucky person. And we had to swim. We had to swim for two hours and my boyfriend doesn't swim . . . so, I was putting him in this tube, and with my life jacket and swimming with him . . . it was really terrible.

Because he cannot swim, Ram, a gay male participant, tried to avoid a situation like the one Alex experienced. Therefore, he attempted to walk from Turkey to Greece but ended up lost in the woods for days. He described that this experience was so traumatic for him that it forced him to make a quick decision to travel by boat: "And then I realized that if I go back, I am also in danger and must make a decision. And then I said to myself, I go in the water there. So I did it."

**Targeted violence and victimization.** Although participants discussed that their sexual and gender identities had been put aside on the boat trip from Turkey to Greece, those who traveled on the migration trail were vulnerable to violence and abuse at other points during their journeys. Pani, who identifies as gender nonconforming, reported that they experienced victimization by other refugees as well as European immigration officials in transit from Greece to Austria:

Even when I want to sleep, I was thinking maybe if I am sleeping they are going to rape me. And once it happened on the train. There were other refugees [who] came to my cabin in the train, and they locked the door and they threatened to have sex with me . . . I was screaming in the cabin on the train to get some help . . . and the officials came and they forced this guy to open the door. And . . . they . . . transferred me to the other train.

Pani reported that on this train, European immigration officers not only searched and ridiculed them but also exposed their body piercings to coworkers. To protect themselves throughout the remainder of the journey, Pani asked a heterosexual couple if they could travel with them: "Until Slovenia, it was really okay being a part of a family, no one checking, no one asking." Unlike Pani, Maria, a transgender woman, decided to present herself as the gender she was assigned at birth to protect herself from harm:

INTERVIEWER: Do you think the experience would be different for a heterosexual person that did the same trip? Or someone who is not transgender?

MARIA: Maybe in the water, the feeling is the same, because everybody is scared. But later, it is really not the same, because I must hide myself . . . I must struggle twice.

Lina, who also identifies as a transgender woman, experienced a different situation on the migration trail. She believed that her ability to pass as a cisgender woman protected her from violence and abuse: "No one knew. Even now when I walk in the street, no one knows that I am a [trans] woman . . . [when] a man or woman see me, they treat me as a woman."

Passing as cisgender or heterosexual allowed participants to keep a low profile, which, in turn, protected them from violence and abuse. However, there were situations in which this was not the case, especially when the perpetrators of abuse were in positions of authority. Ali, a gay male participant, described the harassment he encountered after he was paired with an Arabic-speaking translator as he tried to cross from Macedonia into Serbia:

And [the translator] was telling me to shut up. Shut the fuck up. Don't talk anymore. Shame on you . . . you are gay. In Arabic really bad words. And I was like yeah, I want someone who speaks English. I was screaming there. And the officer was standing far away watching because he saw this situation . . . and he came, [and said] I speak English . . . I said I just want to know what this translator told you. And then they told me he told us you are from ISIS, you are a terrorist. Like, sorry no. I'm a gay, I left my country. I'm gay, but he is doing this because I'm gay.

Not all participants traveled to Europe on the migration trail described above. There were 14 (36.8%) participants who traveled directly to Europe from their countries of origin. Nonetheless, they were still at risk of experiencing abuse. Joshua, a gay male participant, related an encounter he had with immigration officials at a major airport in Europe. When he announced that



he was requesting asylum because of his sexual orientation, the officials reportedly became enraged:

They were really angry and they were just really aggressive. And they were screaming [at] me, and I don't know exactly what they say . . . and they check my bag, everything. They say take off your clothes, [so we can] check your body. And he was screaming to me . . . almost two hours. I thought it was infinite.

**Turned away but trying again.** Participants from countries such as Iran, Lebanon, and Pakistan migrated at the same time that millions of people fled Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan because of war and political instability. Because refugees from designated war-affected countries were given priority at the borders, eight participants who were not from these countries were intercepted at European borders. This extended a grueling migration process and left these individuals at further risk of traumatic exposure. For example, Farid reported that he tried four separate times to cross the Greek border into Macedonia, but he was turned away each time and sent back to Athens:

And finally, I had to stay in a hotel. I was lucky at that time that I still [had] money that I could go to a hotel. Because I was not able to walk anymore, because my feet were completely bleeding and it was very bad.

After 45 days, his fifth attempt was successful. He recalled the moment when the border police authorized his entry into Macedonia, which allowed him to eventually make his way to Austria: "The moment that I could pass the border was really like: 'Oh God, finally.'" For Iwan, a gay male participant, being turned away at the Greek border meant that he had to go back to his country of origin. He explained in his interview that he was brutally assaulted shortly after his return. He reported that this left him desperate and on the verge of suicide. He was finally able to leave his country of origin again after one of his relatives helped him obtain a visa so he could migrate to Europe:

And after this raping happened, I spent like one week [at] home . . . washing with Betadine in the bathroom, not going out. I told my family I'm sick and I can't go out. And everything, even my pain, I don't share it with others . . . so at that time, I have a relative, and I pray to God to really help me leave [my country of origin], because I was on my way either to kill myself, or I don't know what to do, you know?

### Arriving in a Land of Contradictions

**Frightened, victimized, and alone.** After arriving in Austria and the Netherlands, participants assumed that they would get some relief from all that they had been through. They had experienced prolonged trauma prior to migration. Furthermore, the travel phase had been grueling. They continued to struggle in other Middle Eastern countries, paid smugglers a lot of money to migrate to Europe, experienced harrowing sea voyages, and faced discrimination by other refugees and European

immigration officials. Their determination to survive enabled them to make it to Austria and the Netherlands. Yet, participants continued to face setbacks upon their arrival, especially the 28 (73.7%) participants who were placed in refugee camps in Austria ( $n = 11$ ) and the Netherlands ( $n = 17$ ). These participants did not realize the extent to which they still had to hide their sexual orientation and gender identity. Abdel, a gay male participant, expressed how he felt when he first arrived in the camps in Austria: "I was scared, and I was trying to be straight acting all the time." Participants in Dutch migration camps also needed to hide, but they expressed more fear about being targeted. They had either witnessed or heard about violence against LGBTQ refugees in the migration camps.

Despite the risk of being open about his sexual orientation, in the refugee camps, Zayd, a gay male participant, refused to hide. The situation turned violent after he and a man he met and began a relationship with in the camp were attacked by two other refugees. Security guards intervened, but Zayd was uncomfortable with the way camp officials responded to the situation:

The shitty part is that the guy that I was dating, they put us both in separate rooms. I was like: Why would you do that? What is the message you are trying to send to people from this? Or the message you are trying to send to me? I just didn't like the way they handled things at all.

He explained that the two men attacked him and his boyfriend again, but this time he fought back. After the incident occurred, he filed a police report. Still, the judge decided not to press charges against the perpetrators. Zayd described his outrage regarding the verdict: "I still have the court decision. I'm going to keep this. I'm going to keep this for future, because this is just so unfair." Unlike participants who had some degree of control over whether they were open about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity in the camps, participants who identified as transgender or appeared gender nonconforming were often unable to hide. Consequently, they described that they experienced harassment and physical or sexual abuse. Nefertiti, a transgender woman, reported that she experienced sexual harassment by a group of refugees. Staff members told her that it was her fault because she was wearing a short skirt. Nefertiti was eventually transferred to an all-female camp, which, she stated, allowed her to be her authentic self: "I was very happy. It was the same situation when I was [in my country of origin] talking with my mother."

Regardless of whether participants arrived in Austria or the Netherlands, many of the camps were far from cities with visible LGBTQ communities. This made it difficult for participants to meet other LGBTQ individuals, which contributed to their loneliness and isolation. For Ram, who was traumatized by living in a war-torn country and getting lost on the migration trail, living in the camps without connections to the LGBTQ community overwhelmed him:

There is no bus, no train, you are really isolated in one place in the woods. And all these things were too much for me. And that's why I tried to kill myself. But the government who is responsible for certain refugees . . . they saw that and they intervened and put me in treatment to try to get me support.

**Starting from zero.** Feeling the need to connect with other LGBTQ individuals was compounded by the fact that participants did not have the language skills or social supports to address their concrete needs. This was the case for all participants upon arrival, whether they lived in refugee camps or the community. Raha, a lesbian woman, explained that she had a well-paying job and lived on her own before migration. Now she had little money, stayed in migration camps, and lived in apartments with strangers: "This is really something that [hurts] my feelings at the moment. Because I have no other way. I don't know the language . . . I have no idea what to do other than accept the situation." Participants also expressed that they worried about finding translators, immigration attorneys, and refugee-service providers who were LGBTQ-affirmative. Joshua described a situation that occurred by chance, which eventually enabled him to access the LGBTQ-affirmative services he needed:

There was some guy who is speaking on the telephone [in my language]. And I just come to him and say: 'I'm sorry, do you speak [my language]? Because I didn't speak nothing, no English, no German.' And he say: 'Yes.' I say: 'I'm so sorry. Can you help me? Just I don't know where I am now, what I have to do next. What's happened to me?' And he was really surprised about the question. And he say: Are you a refugee? And I say: 'I don't know. I have no idea who I am, I'm just here.'

Despite the extreme stress that participants faced upon arrival, they described that most of the time they were sustained by the hope that, eventually, they could be themselves. For instance, Nefertiti, a transgender woman, decided she would be herself as soon as she arrived in the European Union. She expressed that after she finally felt safe, the first thing she did was march into the airport bathroom to apply her makeup. When asked by the interviewer whether this was the first time she had done this in public, she responded, "In public. Yes. First time. In the Netherlands."

## Discussion

In this study, we examined the traumatic experiences of LGBTQ refugees from MENA and Central and South Asia who fled to Austria and the Netherlands. The current study was the first to assess for PTSD among this population using a standardized measure to demonstrate (a) when the "most distressing event" occurred, and (b) the extent to which PTSD was associated with this event. Results of the PCL-5 indicated that most participants identified their most traumatic event as having occurred during the premigration phase, with 64.9% of

participants having met criteria for a provisional diagnosis of PTSD. For these participants, 15 reported that the precipitating event was related to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, while 9 reported that it was related to another type of event (e.g., sudden death of a family member, living in a war zone). Consistent with the PCL-5, themes suggested that participants typically experienced premigration violence and abuse by family and community members, state actors, and militia groups. Additionally, participants experienced war, political conflict, and abuse by family members unrelated to their sexual and gender identities. Regardless of participants' most distressing event, most struggled to reconcile their sexual orientation and/or gender identity with traditional values and religious norms. They also grappled with the knowledge that they risked shaming their families should they choose to embrace their authentic selves. Individuals who were able to hide their sexual orientation and/or gender identity struggled with loneliness and lived in constant fear for their lives should someone discover their identity. Similar to what has been reported in previous research, these experiences shaped the decisions of most to flee (Alessi et al., 2016; Alessi et al., 2017; Hopkinson et al., 2017; Shidlo & Ahola, 2013). However, there was one participant, who, despite having to hide, reflected positively on his life as a gay man in his country of origin; he reported fleeing solely due to war.

We found that prior to participants' arrival in the European Union, most fled to other Middle Eastern countries first. Although these countries (e.g., Turkey) provided temporary safety, participants continued to experience minority stress (e.g., violence and harassment based on their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, perceived stigma, and the need to conceal their sexual orientation and/or gender identity; Meyer, 2003, 2015) as well as hardships common to most refugees (e.g., finding employment, language barriers). This finding indicates how important it is to conceptualize migration as a nonsequential process that encompasses multiple phases (see Zimmerman et al., 2011). At times, it was hard for us to track where participants' journeys had begun and ended. We found that with this complexity came the increased risk of traumatic exposure based on participants' sexual orientation and/or gender identity. It was only during the harrowing boat voyage that participants described feeling similar to heterosexual refugees. Once participants arrived in Greece, however, they realized that they needed to protect themselves from anti-LGBTQ violence and harassment. Despite their attempts to do so, many encountered victimization by other refugees and/or European immigration officials. Upon arriving in Austria and the Netherlands, individuals in refugee camps still needed to hide their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Participants who were unable to do so or were "discovered" experienced violence and/or abuse, making them feel like they were back in their countries of origin. Participants who stayed in the camps also felt isolated from the LGBTQ community and were uncertain about how to access affirmative support services. This lack of support contributed to hopelessness and suicidality among these participants. To

better understand participants' psychological state upon their arrival in Austria or the Netherlands and shortly thereafter, their experiences must be understood in totality. Although 89.2% of participants reported their most distressing event as having occurred prior to departure, participants also experienced trauma throughout the migration process. Exposure to trauma also continued after arriving in Austria and the Netherlands. Although this may not be entirely uncommon for other refugees (Li, Liddell, & Nickerson, 2016), LGBTQ refugees do not have the same level of support to help them manage such stress compared to non-LGBTQ refugees. Social support from family and diaspora community members has been shown to predict psychological well-being in refugees (Schweitzer, Melville, Steel, & Lacherez, 2006). However, this type of support was not available for most participants.

Our findings therefore underscore the need to put specific mechanisms in place to assist LGBTQ refugees during humanitarian emergencies. These mechanisms may help LGBTQ refugees cope with trauma and prevent retraumatizing them. First, refugee assistance workers, immigration officials, and translators should receive mandatory training in terminology and concepts related to sexual orientation and gender identity (see training manuals developed by International Office of Migration, 2016; Organization for Refugee, Asylum, & Migration, 2016). Including discussions of how trauma affects LGBTQ refugees throughout each phase of migration will also be important. Trainings that use role-playing to help refugee assistance workers and other immigration personnel interact with LGBTQ refugees in a trauma-informed and affirmative manner may also improve service delivery for this population. Although some European Union countries do provide this type of training, it is not yet required (FRA, 2017). Second, refugee reception centers should develop outreach programs to engage LGBTQ refugees in ways that do not inadvertently make their sexual orientation and/or gender identity known to other refugees. To do this, centers can display universal symbols of LGBTQ inclusiveness (e.g., rainbow flags) and posters in various languages that proclaim support for sexual and gender minorities. Providing all refugees with pamphlets that include information about how to access LGBTQ-affirmative immigration lawyers and health and mental health providers can also help ease the situation for new arrivals without making them reveal their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Such pamphlets must state that LGBTQ refugees can inquire about and access these services in ways that allow for discretion (e.g., in private areas in the camps or in offsite meetings). Third, policies and practices aiming to provide LGBTQ refugees with safe accommodation should be developed. Because LGBTQ-specific housing may not always be available (FRA, 2017), mechanisms should be established to protect LGBTQ refugees in migration centers and camps. For example, transgender refugees should be placed in camps that match their gender identities, regardless of the sex indicated on their identification documents (FRA, 2017; Rumbach & Knight, 2013). Moreover, access to gender-neutral restrooms and single-stall showers

in such camps should be mandatory (Rumbach & Knight, 2014).

This study had a number of strengths (e.g., the use of multiple methods) but also noteworthy limitations. First, the use of purposive sampling did not allow us to generalize findings from the PCL-5 to the population of LGBTQ refugees from MENA and Central and South Asia. Scores from the Arabic version of the PCL-5 must also be interpreted with caution. Although we translated the measure from English to Arabic using forward- and back-translations, we were unable to pilot this version before it was administered to study participants. Nonetheless, we worked to ensure that participants understood the measure and used alternative words when certain expressions were not clear. We also found that the PCL-5 had good internal consistency, suggesting it was a reliable measure of PTSD. Second, our sample included mostly gay men. Thus, we were unable to capture the experiences of lesbian, bisexual, and transgender refugees with the same level of depth; future research that examines the issues specific to their migration trajectories is necessary. Nonetheless, 36.8% of participants in this study did identify as either lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer, allowing us to provide some perspective on their experiences. Additionally, only individuals who received services through one of the two organizations mentioned earlier were informed about the study, thus preventing those who may not have been comfortable disclosing their identities from participating. Future studies would benefit from enhancing recruitment methods in order to capture the experiences of these LGBTQ refugees. Third, we were unable to conduct member checking with participants (i.e., contact those who participated in the study to see whether themes captured their experiences). However, the credibility of the study was enhanced by our use of multiple forms of data collection as well as multiple coders during the analytic process. Finally, participants' personal accounts may not have explicitly demonstrated that they possessed extraordinary resilience. Similar to what has been reported in previous research (Alessi, 2016; Bayramoglu & Lunenborg, 2018), participants were able to persevere even while they struggled with the vicissitudes of migration and symptoms of PTSD.

Despite these limitations, this study underscored the complexities of migration in an era of globalization. Findings point toward the need for policies to protect LGBTQ refugees throughout the migration process. International migration policies—and the state and local actors who implement them—must do better to recognize and respond to the vulnerabilities of LGBTQ refugees along well-traveled migration routes and in countries of asylum.

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