

# Understanding the effects of being separated from family on refugees in Australia: a qualitative study

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Family separation (i.e. living in different countries and unable to physically reunite) is commonplace amongst people forcibly displaced from their homes due to conflict, war or persecution.<sup>1-4</sup> Long-term separation may be the result of needing to flee quickly without family, separation in the process of displacement, family members going missing, or substantive barriers to family reunification following safe resettlement in a host country that may include restrictive visas, financial costs and protracted family reunification application processes.<sup>4-6</sup> Quantitative research indicates that family separation can independently affect the psychological health of refugees, alongside other known determinants such as pre-migration trauma and post-migration stress.<sup>7</sup> For example, family separation has been associated with increased rates of depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and anxiety<sup>1,8-13</sup> and poor quality of life in refugee groups.<sup>1,12</sup> Poor concentration and impaired sleep appear to be common symptoms amongst refugees separated from family.<sup>14</sup> As such, the capacity of refugees experiencing separation to effectively recover from their traumatic experiences or to settle in their new host country may be compromised.<sup>1,2,5,6,14</sup>

While it is clear that family separation is harmful to mental health, only a small number of studies have examined why this is the case. One central factor appears to be worry in the form of intrusive thoughts relating to the physical safety of separated family members. In one quantitative

## Abstract

**Objective:** To understand the impact of family separation on refugees living in Australia.

**Method:** Thirteen participants with a refugee background and experiencing separation from family participated in a semi-structured qualitative interview. Interviews were coded and a thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo software.

**Results:** Identified themes were organised under four domains. Domain 1 focused on the personal impact of family separation. Themes were the effects on mental health and functioning, driven by incessant worrying about the safety of family and the absence of key attachment figures, the specific effects of having missing family, alterations to self-identity and family dynamics. Domain 2 focused on themes relating to actions taken to find missing family, connect or reunite with separated family. Domain 3 highlighted the coping strategies, support mechanisms and protective factors used by participants. Domain 4 identified core beliefs about the importance of family unity, focusing on security, settlement and a happy future.

**Conclusions:** Family separation has an enduring effect on the wellbeing of refugees, with key pathways being ongoing fear and insecurity, disrupted social attachments and identity shifts in relation to the future self.

**Implications for public health:** Refugees separated from or missing family struggle with ongoing stress and adjustment issues.

**Key words:** refugee, family separation, missing family, mental health, psychological distress

study, intrusive fears for family remaining in a conflict situation contributed to increased risk for PTSD, depression and functional disability.<sup>15</sup> A recent longitudinal study found that worry about separated family contributed to the maintenance of PTSD symptoms over time amongst a representative sample of resettled refugees in Australia.<sup>16</sup> The adverse effects of worry about family as a key determinant of mental health has also been verified in several qualitative studies,<sup>1,2,11</sup> including interfering with concentration, job performance or study. Other studies have instead emphasised the role of social and cultural factors in

contributing to poor mental health. Collective cultural values in particular may be a key factor influencing the impact of family separation amongst refugee groups, as many are from collectivistic cultural groups that place high value on familial relationships and social connections as being integral to self-identity.<sup>1,8,9</sup> One quantitative study found that higher levels of collectivism was associated with elevated PTSD, depression and disability symptoms via increased social-based post-migration stressors (i.e. feeling isolated or lonely) in a large group of refugees separated from their immediate family.<sup>9</sup> The role of collectivism has also been observed

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in qualitative studies.<sup>1,11</sup> The social costs of ongoing separation could be due to the impact on self-identity, through the removal of established social networks and support structures.<sup>17</sup> Another major factor that has been highlighted in qualitative studies is related to the burden of having to financially support separated family members, which can result in increased stress<sup>3,11</sup> and reduced opportunity to study or seek meaningful employment.<sup>4</sup> Despite these insights, more research is needed to understand the psychological and social processes affected by family separation, in order to develop clearer evidence-based models to guide practice and policy.

This study aims to understand the specific effects of being separated from family on refugees settled in Australia. Through conducting a series of qualitative interviews with refugees currently experiencing separation in a variety of forms, we sought to understand how separation affected these individuals and their families, how they responded to and coped with their situation, and to assess their belief systems connected to the role of family in their lives.

## Methods

### Study context

This study was conducted as a collaboration between the Refugee Trauma and Recovery Program (RTRP), UNSW Sydney and Australian Red Cross Restoring Family Links (RFL) Program. The RFL program a 150-year-old global initiative of the International Red Cross/ Red Crescent Movement with an aim to restore contact between family members where separation has occurred as result of war, disaster or migration.<sup>18,19</sup> The Australian Red Cross RFL program is freely available for any member of the Australian community and has assisted 12,000 families over the past 20 years searching for missing loved ones. Individuals can request that Red Cross search for their missing family members, who will utilise international networks of the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement to activate a search, a process that is managed by an RFL Field Officer (i.e. case manager). Australian Red Cross and RTRP have collaborated on a number of previous research studies (e.g.<sup>9,20</sup>), which led to the development of this project aiming to understand the impact of family separation on refugees.

### Participants

Participants were recruited from the Australian Red Cross RFL program client database. Inclusion criteria for this study were that participants must be currently experiencing family separation, that they had arrived in Australia as a refugee, asylum seeker or migrant, and were aged over 18 years old. A total of 37 individuals from the RFL database were contacted about the study by an Australian Red Cross employee who was not their Field Officer to minimise coercion. Additionally, they were informed that participation was voluntary, their decision would not affect their relationship with Australian Red Cross and they could withdraw at any time, in accordance with approval for the study from the UNSW Human Research Ethics Committee (HC190214). Thirteen individuals agreed to take part who met inclusion criteria.

Eight of the participants identified as women and five as men. All participants had been born overseas and arrived in Australia as refugees or asylum seekers. The majority originated from either Ethiopia (N=5) or Eritrea (N=2), one participant was from the Democratic Republic of Congo, one participant was from Sudan, one participant was from Afghanistan, one participant was from Malaysia, and a further two participants did not disclose their country of origin. Five participants currently had a missing family member, and seven participants previously had missing family members but had since restored contact with them (usually via the RFL Program or another agency). All participants remained separated from at least one important family member and none had been physically reunited with their separated family at the time of interview. For nine participants, their primary separation was from their parents and siblings, one participant was separated from their spouse, one participant from their children, one participant from both their spouse and children, and one participant from their uncle. The mean duration of separation was 17.1 years ( $SD=12.0$ ), which occurred as a result of forced displacement. Eight of the participants had some immediate family in Australia.

### Interview process

Participants completed a semi-structured interview with an Australian Red Cross RFL Field Officer after providing informed consent. Interviews were conducted by

Australian Red Cross to facilitate national participation across Australia (predominantly Sydney, Melbourne and Perth) and to maximise the comfort of participants. Interviews took place between July and October 2019 and were conducted face-to-face in a Red Cross office (N=11) or on the phone (N=2) separate from any regular casework support services provided by Red Cross. Professional interpreters were used if requested by the participant (N=8) and several participants also brought a support person with them. Interviews took between 30-90 minutes and were audio-recorded for transcription purposes with participant's permission. Participants were provided with an AUD\$50 shopping voucher to reimburse them for expenses associated with taking part in the study. Field Officers conducting the interviews were provided with training and written guidelines about administering semi-structured interviews from the study authors. Interviewers were instructed to ask follow-up questions throughout the interview. The semi-structured interview questions focused on core domains covering the impact of separation from family, including effects on health, wellbeing, social relationships and functioning, how people maintained contact with separated family, queries regarding the importance of family unity and what coping processes participants used.

### Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed into written English by ARC volunteers or UNSW staff between August-November 2019 for the purposes of data analysis. A thematic analysis was conducted via NVivo12 software. Following transcript de-identification, a coding framework was developed. A hybrid analysis approach was used that combined theoretical and data-driven approaches. The theoretical basis was derived from the research and practice-based expertise of the study authors regarding the effects of family separation on people with a refugee background, and as such, we recognise that the generation of the coding framework was not conducted by naïve analysts.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the interview questions and lines of enquiry were generated based on previous evidence and informed by practice-based insights. At the same time, grounded theory principles were partially utilised to enable a data-driven approach to seek new patterns in the data.<sup>22</sup> Themes were identified based on shared experiences

across the participants, rather than on examining the experience of separation from the perspective of different demographic or contextual factors – largely due to the modest sample size.

Data were coded by a researcher at UNSW and an ARC RFL Field Officer – who jointly established the coding framework using a consensus approach. The coding framework was subsequently implemented by a third independent coder. Coding was largely consistent between the three coders, with minor discrepancies resolved via consensus. Coded data was merged for thematic analysis following established qualitative study guidelines.<sup>21,23</sup>

## Results

Four salient domains were extracted as the organisational framework for the themes identified in the data.

### Domain 1: Personal impact of family separation

**Impact theme 1: Mental health and functioning.** Participants described their separation from family as adversely influencing their mental health. All participants reported experiencing fear – for the safety of their family members and themselves – marked by constant worry. One participant shared, “I’m partly safer [in Australia], but inside I’m not safe (...). The reason is because (...) I’m always afraid for the future of my family” (Participant 4; note that original participant ID numbers allocated at recruitment have been retained for reporting purposes). This preoccupation with separated family significantly interfered with participants’ psychological wellbeing and general functioning.

*Basically, this particular situation of separation – there is no other thing or vision or idea that comes to your mind. You just think about your family, what is happening to your family, how is their wellbeing, what’s going on with them, what’s happening to them. You never think about making friends, working, doing this or doing that – no. You are just focused on thinking about what’s happening to my family. That’s it every day, every minute.* (Participant 10)

Separation exerted an emotional toll on participants, particularly featuring sadness, fear and hardship, with all participants describing their situation in negative

emotional terms such as being ‘hard’, ‘difficult’, ‘challenging’ ‘experiencing pressure’, or ‘causing suffering’. Particularly difficult was living with the uncertainty about what was happening for their separated family member.

*Yes, separation is very hard, it’s very hard to be separated from your family. You never know whether they are alive or dead, even they have been impacted mentally and spiritually.* (Participant 10)

Interviewees reported experiencing other mental health issues such as anxiety, stress, depression and helplessness connected with their separation, as well as sleep disturbances, appetite changes and physical health issues.

*It has affected mentally for me because I got depression, very severe depression, I got very ill, I got so unwell and especially my young son and my other children, we were all with mental health problems like depression.* (Participant 21)

Family separation also affected the daily and social functioning of all participants in various ways. This included interfering with capacity to work or study, tied to the emotional burden of the separation. For example, one participant shared that, “In that time, I didn’t even go to school or work because I was feeling very sad” (Participant 9). Not having practical support from family also interfered with daily functioning for some participants – e.g. lack of child care that would enable participants to work or study, or provide support when experiencing ill-health. For example:

*If my siblings were here, they could probably help me look after my children, we could have shifts; some go to work and some look after children. I can’t work full time or can’t work the hours I want because I don’t have anywhere I can put my children. Sometimes when my husband is sick, he doesn’t go to work, and no one can look after the children. It’s so hard for us to manage life.* (Participant 10)

The effects of separation on social functioning could be attributed to two primary reasons. The first was because participants were pre-occupied with their separated family members and were unable to engage socially, for example:

*In that time, when I was thinking about my family, I didn’t think to make friends or to say hello to people or interact with other people. I wasn’t even smiling or laughing. When I met someone, and they said hello to me, it was just “hello, hello”. To say it or to socialize, it was impossible.* (Participant 10)

The second impact on social functioning related to loss of social support, as family members were not present to buffer the effects of stress, provide security and support, as well as assistance to facilitate social opportunities. This in turn negatively impacted some participants’ adjustment to life in Australia.

*So I think that if my sisters and my mum they come to Australia it will be a bonus for me and as I say to you I don’t have any social life, I don’t associate with [North African country-of-origin] community here or any other people and I can’t live my own life, and I’m working hard and trying to improve my life. In fact, very recently I had depression and when I had surgery here, and operation and when I had that operation I didn’t have anyone to look after me and I was struggling by myself.* (Participant 30)

### Impact theme 2: Specific mental health effects of having missing compared with separated family members.

An important theme was the specific effects of having a missing family member compared to being connected with family but separated from them. When family members were missing, feelings of grief, despair and yearning were commonly reported, alongside a sense of a lack of control and helplessness over being able to locate their family member. For seven of the participants, they had been reconnected with missing family members prior to interview (i.e. learning they are alive and being able to communicate with them), and this event was associated with high positive emotions such as joy and relief – “It’s like getting out of the darkness and to the bright” (Participant 38). Participants also reported a change in the nature of their distress. Once links with their missing family member were restored, stress levels increased. Participants described feeling an increased personal responsibility for the wellbeing, safety and livelihood of their separated family member, which was associated with heightened pressure to support them. Some participants described being fearful that their family member would go missing again:

*When she was missing I am just thinking I could not find her anymore, but now, as I said, sometimes I wake up at 12, night time, give them a call to check that they are alive so that make me (a) bit happy but doesn’t continue (to) always make me happy. Okay (maybe) she will go missing again I will lose her again you know? I don’t have any guarantee she is safe now. She is in [capital city in North Africa]*

*but she is not safe. If you miss someone, (it) feel(s) like she's dead. She is alive now. She(s) not safe. Which means if I miss her again she will be dead. It is very difficult.* (Participant 28)

Most participants described feeling a strong sense of responsibility for separated family members. This included providing financial support (i.e. remittances), with the majority sending all their spare income to family members or working multiple jobs to support the needs of their family, particularly if their separated family were their children or elderly parents. As Participant 30 stated, "whenever I have money, I (am) willing to support them and send money, so (if) I don't have any spare money (as) whatever money I have I always support them and send it." This affected some participants' capacity to realise personal goals, such as studying or engaging socially, because of their commitments to support their separated family.

**Impact theme 3: Self-identity.** Family separation appears to affect self-identity, with participants describing how being separated from family shifted their sense of place in the world and diminished their future hopes. Some shared how separation "changes your personality, it changes everything, you don't think of anything else at the time" (Participant 10) and how "it had affected me for whole my life. Not just about studying or getting work or communicating. All my life was affected. Not thinking about (the) future. Just thinking about short(-term) things" (Participant 28). More than half of the participants also described how their separation affected their engagement in cultural or religious practices vital to self-identity. Common was a sense of cultural loss without family to provide a continuity of cultural practices and rituals. Feelings of social isolation were amplified by the absence of the cultural anchor of the family, leading to feeling more unsettled and less connected in their new Australian home and community.

**Impact theme 4: Family dynamics.** Ongoing family separation also appeared to affect the dynamics of the family, especially if mental health difficulties were experienced: "He's crying from there, my children are crying from here" (Participant 21). Also common was a shift of role in the family to assume new responsibilities, for example adult children financially and emotionally supporting their parents or siblings.

*I am the elder of all. Just everything was just, the responsibility of all was always on me when I was there, because my father was*

*disappeared. And the others are younger than me. Because of this, I feel great responsibility about them.* (Participant 36)

Relationships were often strained due to difficulties in navigating family reunification programs and visa application processes, particularly if participants were on a certain type of visas that prevented travel or bringing family to Australia. One participant reported the significant distress of their son, who was unable to leave Australia to visit his recently located father because of travel restrictions on his visa. Another described the breakdown in trust between him and his growing children because he was unable to fulfil his promise of bringing them to Australia to live with him. More broadly, many participants reported a feeling of disconnection with extended family and their community due to their separation, contributing to the sense of cultural and familial loss.

### **Domain 2: Actions taken to connect with separated or missing family**

Participants reported acting in three key areas – to assist in finding missing family, to maintain communication with separated family or to work towards physical reunification, and each were associated with a number of barriers and enablers. Notably there were links across Domains; i.e. barriers to acting were associated with increased burden on mental health (Domain 1), and enablers alleviated distress and facilitated coping (Domain 3).

**Action theme 1: Actions taken to find missing family members.** Participants who had missing family at the time of interview or in the past described steps they took to find their family members. Enablers included receiving support from organisations like the Australian Red Cross via the Restoring Family Links program or UNHCR to facilitate finding missing family, for example "I couldn't find anybody who could help me to contact until I found you guys (i.e. Red Cross)" (Participant 38). Key barriers to finding missing family included ongoing conflict in the area where the family member went missing or a lack of official information, as one participant relayed "There's not much record of things. They don't even have birth certificates" (Participant 16).

**Action theme 2: Actions taken to maintain communication with separated family.** All participants who were connected with their separated family made a significant effort to keep contact with them. A key barrier

to maintaining communication was the expense of mobile phone calls: mobile phone contact was the most prevalent means of communication with separated family living in camps or remote areas without internet connectivity - "If I got money I will give her a call. Otherwise I have to wait" (Participant 28). While communicating with separated family was critical to the wellbeing of participants providing reassurance to them and their family, it often resulted in increased distress. For example,

*Sometimes it's distressing, sometimes it's happiness, because we talk about the past and the flashbacks, and so forth, but at the end, I tell her that you just pray to God and forget all bad memories of the past, so sometimes it's stressful, and sometimes it ends with happiness.* (Participant 38)

As such, participants frequently described providing emotional support to their separated family members. Continuing the example above:

*I tell her to forget about it, advise her, all the problems are in the past, and it will be history, so just pray to God and then whenever you need to talk to me, just flash me (on the phone), and I'll call you back.* (Participant 38)

### **Action theme 3: Actions taken to physically reunite with separated family members.**

Participants also expressed a strong desire to arrange bringing their family to live with them in Australia. Many had applied for family reunification via official immigration pathways with the Australian Government, with a key enabling factor being legal support to navigate the application process, but the prolonged processing time caused anxiety compounded by their family putting pressure on participants to do more.

*They were just calling me to like hurry up... I told them it's not up to me, it's up to the Government.* (Participant 16)

### **Domain 3: Coping with family separation**

The third domain identified related to coping with family separation, the implementation of various coping strategies and engagement of support mechanisms, which commonly resulted in positive coping and increased resilience.

**Coping theme 1: Coping strategies.** Most participants engaged in some form of activity-based (e.g. working), social (e.g. social support), spiritual (e.g. religious practice), or cognitive and emotion-based (e.g. distraction, acceptance) coping. These

strategies helped to distract participants from their worries related to separated family members, for example, "I was going to visit one of my friends here, and I'd feel relieved. I'd forget at the time that I visited my friends, but upon leaving, I'd remember again" (Participant 10). Some strategies were more problematic, including ruminating about family, avoiding thinking about their family or social withdrawal, which would undermine wellbeing.

*I try to forget them ... Yes because you know when I think about them I just gets really upset and I just want, I wish – that I could just go and see them, or that they just lived around the corner or something.* (Participant 9)

**Coping theme 2: Support.** Receiving formal support (via professional services including mental health services, government or non-government services) or informal support (via other family members with them in Australia, peers, and community members) was common, and was associated with positive coping. Barriers to receiving adequate support included lack of information regarding available formal support, poor English language proficiency, difficulty talking with others, and social isolation – driven by the absence of key family members.

**Coping theme 3: Protective and resilience factors.** Broadly, there appeared to be particular protective factors associated with more positive coping. These factors included maintaining hope for the future of their family, taking concrete action to assist their family (Domain 2), having at least some family in Australia and taking advantage of new opportunities in Australia.

*Six years without living with my family. But I'm thinking about the future of my kids. My daughter was 5 months only when I came here now she 7 years. My son 1 year, now he's 8 years, so now I'm just fighting for their future. Even if their future is unknown now as long as I'm here.* (Participant 4)

#### Domain 4: Beliefs and values related to family unity

Participants reflected on the importance of family, where two themes were identified:

**Beliefs theme 1: Importance of connection with family.** All participants agreed that family connection is a vital component of human life. As one participant said, "if you live without (family) it's not life. What kind of life is this? We all have to live together as a family" (Participant 21). Participants endorsed the idea that a united family is

instrumental for navigating challenges and buffering the adverse effects of stress. One participant shared "There are a lot of things that can have as serious impact on our lives when we don't have our relatives together with us" (Participant 32). Thus, participants believed that a connected and present family supports individuals to thrive, develop roots and participate in the broader community. For example:

*Being together, or having constant contact with your family member is important because you share the problem, you solve the problem together, and you help one another, emotionally, economically, and being together helps to build a future life together with family members, that's why it's important.* (Participant 38)

**Beliefs theme 2: Reasons for wanting to be reunited with family.** Reasons for wanting to be reunited included that it would bring participant's peace and happiness, provide security and support, and facilitate settlement in Australia. As a participant expressed:

*If I had my family members around, my uncle, it could have made everything easier. Even here in Australia, I could have had him, I could have continued with my higher education because he would be there, maybe look for work, support me, and I could have even gone (studying) because I believe I was smart enough. But because I had no support, no relatives, no nothing whatsoever, I had to take care of myself, stop studying and go for work. Pay bills, put food on the table. Having relatives, definitely you cannot compare it with any other things.* (Participant 32)

## Discussion

The findings from this study identify some of the key factors underlying the impact of being separated from family on people with a refugee background now living in Australia. Outcomes reveal a number of contextual factors that heighten the adverse impact of family separation, including whether family members are also missing, and highlight the complex experiences of people with separated family over the long term. Here, we discuss the main findings from the study through the lens of psychological models of refugee trauma, mental health, attachment theory and settlement adaptation.

### Impact of family separation on mental health and wellbeing

This study accords with previous research that has emphasised the impact of

family separation on the mental health of refugees.<sup>1,8,9,12,16</sup> Drawing from current models of refugee mental health, we suggest three core pathways for *why* family separation places a significant burden on refugee psychological health: 1) **Insecurity**: worry about the security of separated family members coupled with ongoing uncertainty about when there will be physical reunification with separated family members; 2) **Interpersonal**: disruptions to attachment systems due to the absence of family; 3) **Personal**: changes to identity due to changes in perceptions of the future self and role in the family.

1. **Insecurity: Ongoing uncertainty.** We found that worrying about missing or separated family was a dominant concern for all participants in this study, with worry affecting psychological health and daily functioning. This is consistent with observations from previous research conducted with refugees separated from their families.<sup>1,2,8,11,14</sup> While key models highlight that pre-migration (i.e. conflict or persecution-related trauma) and post-migration experiences (i.e. daily stressors) can interact to affect mental health,<sup>24-26</sup> we suggest that ongoing family separation may result in difficulty differentiating between traumatic events in the past and current stressors when the lived experience of the separated family member is one of continuing danger and direct threat.<sup>1,11</sup> This notion has been described as the "local-global nexus" – where **global** issues affecting separated family (e.g. conflict, persecution, insecurity, daily stressors) directly impact on the **local** experience of the individual via preoccupying worries about the family member's safety,<sup>27</sup> heightened perceptions of insecurity of the separated family member<sup>1</sup> and perception of low levels of control over global events.<sup>11</sup> This in turn places a significant burden on psychological health, as observed in previous studies,<sup>15</sup> including contributing to maintaining PTSD symptoms over time.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, ongoing separation from family living in conflict-affected or insecure settings could complicate post-trauma recovery for resettled refugees,<sup>1</sup> resulting in maintenance or escalation of psychological distress.

2. **Interpersonal: Disruption to attachment systems.** A number of refugee mental health models highlight that exposure to human rights violations like torture

and persecution can affect social and attachment processes.<sup>24,26,28</sup> For example, the Adaptation and Development After Persecution and Trauma (ADAPT) model outlines five areas that are disrupted by mass conflict and forced displacement.<sup>26</sup> One of these areas relates to “Bonds/ Networks”, which recognises the impact of traumatic loss on the supportive structures of families and communities, and that repairing these interpersonal relationships is critical to trauma recovery. Ongoing family separation undermines this restoration, potentially prolonging recovery from trauma and interfering with normal grieving processes following loss. Our findings support this notion, indicating that family separation and ambiguous loss connected with missing family<sup>29</sup> alters capacity to socially function. Additionally, interpersonal traumatic events common to the refugee experience (e.g. torture, conflict), coupled with ongoing family separation, may disrupt core attachment systems at the basic level.<sup>30,31</sup> Attachment theory holds that important social attachment figures like family members, play a vital role in buffering the adverse effects of stressors by enhancing adaptive emotion functioning.<sup>32</sup> The absence of attachment figures because of enduring separation results in the loss of this co-regulation social framework, which may impede coping, stress management and undermine wellbeing.<sup>33,34</sup> According to Social Baseline Theory,<sup>35</sup> the presence of others – particularly close attachment figures – helps conserve metabolic energy that can be directed to other goal-related activities (e.g. studying or working). When supportive people are unavailable due to prolonged separation, the individual needs to increase their physiological and cognitive efforts to function effectively.<sup>35</sup> We suggest that for refugees who are separated from their families, the increased physiological effort to engage with the world comes at a cost to their wellbeing, particularly if separation is prolonged and is coupled with significant fears for family and post-migration pressures. This may underlie why some of the participants in our study found it difficult to participate in daily activities such as work, study or engaging socially. This accords with research demonstrating that ongoing family separation interferes with refugees achieving positive settlement outcomes (e.g. seeking employment, studying

language, building social networks).<sup>2,6,8,11,14</sup>

3. *Personal: Changes to identity.* A salient theme identified in this study was that family separation shifted self-identity via changes in roles and expectations and disrupted cultural links. The impact of separation could be prominent for individuals who hold a self-concept that is more collectivistic<sup>1,11</sup> – which emphasises a sense of self that is tightly interwoven with others (i.e. ‘we’), particularly significant others like family. A collectivistic self-identity is more common in non-Western cultures from which many refugees originate. In a large study of resettled refugees in Australia, collectivism was related to increased PTSD, depression and disability via greater social-related difficulties (e.g. loneliness) in those separated from immediate family.<sup>9</sup> This pattern was not observed in those with at least some family with them in Australia. The findings from this qualitative study also support the notion that the absence of family can result in a contracted view of establishing a meaningful life in Australia without key family members.<sup>1</sup>

### ***The specific effects of having missing family compared to being separated from family***

We observed differences between the effects of family being missing or separated on emotional responses and sense of control. In terms of emotional impact, when missing, participants described feeling despair and a yearning for information about the fate of the missing family, akin to grief. This may reflect ‘ambiguous loss’ where a loss occurs without resolution,<sup>36</sup> and has been previously observed amongst those with loved ones who have disappeared.<sup>37,38</sup> When family members were separated without being missing, the emotional impact appeared to take on a different form. Complex emotions were reported by participants in this situation: joy at being reconnected, but difficulties connected with the uncertainty and insecurity of ongoing separation and the pressure of emotionally protecting and financially supporting separated family.<sup>11,39</sup> In terms of control, participants described low levels of control when family were missing, including externalisation of blame connected with ambiguous loss,<sup>29</sup> which transferred to greater controllability when people were reconnected with their family (i.e. having personal responsibility for family). These

shifts in emotions and controllability over a challenging situation suggest that the needs of people with missing family are distinct from the needs of those who are connected but remain separated from their family.

### ***Policy and practice implications***

This study adds to the growing literature highlighting the detrimental effects of prolonged family separation on refugees. Reducing the burden of family separation could be achieved by promoting family reunification pathways that are more simple, transparent, accessible, timely and flexible. Barriers could be overcome by facilitating access to legal services and interpreters. Immigration policies that enable family reunification could result in significant benefit to host nations by achieving positive settlement outcomes and enhancing participation in economic, social and cultural activities. From a practice perspective, refugees may have experienced different psychological, social and practical ramifications of family separation, which likely change over time. Refugees with missing family may have specific needs and these needs may shift even if the positive event of being reconnected with a missing family member occurs. At the same time, refugees separated from family are constantly adapting and finding ways to cope with their situation, exhibiting a delicate balance between hope and despair. The findings underscore the importance of adopting a person-centred approach when working with and supporting refugees with missing or separated family.

### ***Limitations***

Findings should be interpreted within the context of a number of limitations. The study had a modest sample size, and while we did observe that demographic and contextual factors appeared to matter (i.e. relationship to separated family member, time of separation, current visa status, gender), a deeper understanding of the distinct features of missing family compared with separated family in particular will require larger participant cohorts. From a methodological perspective, we did not conduct member checking as part of the validation pathway of the study, although participants were provided with copies of their interview transcript and a summary of the outcomes of the thematic analysis. The study also focused on participants living in a resettlement context (i.e. Australia); their experience of

family separation may differ from those facing separation in different contexts such as sustained displacement or ongoing conflict.

## Conclusions

Our study highlights the multiple difficulties family separation can pose for refugees, particularly as they recover from traumatic injury and attempt to resettle in a new country without key family members. Ultimately, policies that support and facilitate the unification of separated families are likely to enhance psychological wellbeing<sup>40</sup> and promote positive settlement for refugees living in the Australian community.

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