

# Improving Psychological Outcomes for North Korean Refugees: A Research Agenda

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## Abstract

North Korean refugees often experience persistent mental health concerns after departing from North Korea. These concerns may arise in relation to traumas experienced within North Korea, bereavement over separation from family members, and difficulties in adjusting to life outside North Korea. Post-traumatic stress disorder is common among North Korean refugees, yet there is a surprising lack of research investigating post-traumatic growth among this population. Post-traumatic growth involves global changes to one's outlook on life, and is associated with reduced psychological symptom burden among trauma survivors. Post-traumatic growth is an important component of recovery following trauma, and leads to better long term outcomes. There is a scarcity of research however investigating this phenomenon among North Korean refugees. In this short communication, a research agenda emphasising post-traumatic growth among North Korean refugees is emphasised. Areas for future research include the relationship between post-traumatic growth and autonomy, psychological grit and hardiness, and experiential avoidance. Rather than adopting a symptom-driven agenda, researchers should investigate adaptive functioning and the process of finding meaning among North Korean refugees.

## Introduction:

The North Korean leadership has been condemned in recent times for gross human rights violations. These violations include but are not limited to, arbitrary arrests and detention, torture and forced starvation, suppression of freedom of speech, and forced labour (Amnesty International, 2015). In response to difficulties experienced within North Korea, many citizens seek to escape from the country each year, seeking refuge in neighbouring countries such as China and South Korea. Due to the extremely dangerous nature of the escape journey, the excessively harsh living conditions within North Korea, and the potential danger imposed upon family members who are left behind, many North Korean refugees experience mental health concerns such as post-traumatic stress, depression, and anxiety (Jeon, et al., 2005; Jeon et al., 2009; Kim et al., 2011).

Mental health concerns among North Korean refugees may also arise in response to difficulties in adjusting to the markedly different lifestyles and cultures that refugees experience outside of North Korea (Um, Chi, Kim, Palinkas, & Kim, 2015). To date, researchers have identified various socio-cultural and demographic factors associated with better mental health outcomes for North Korean refugees, including employment, social support, and income (Park, Cho, & Yoon, 2009; Jeon, Eom, & Min, 2013); and factors associated with poorer outcomes, including discrimination, greater transit time in China, and psychological co-morbidity (Yu & Jeon, 2008; Kim et al., 2011). Mental health concerns such as depression and anxiety may increase however with the number of years settled within South Korea (Yu & Jeon, 2008). Further, North Korean refugees are vulnerable to mental health concerns not limited to depression and anxiety, including paranoia, alcoholism, and reduced health-related quality

of life (Jeon et al., 2009; Kim et al., 2011). Thus there is a need to stimulate further research on mental health concerns among North Korean refugees, with the aim of improving clinical outcomes for this population.

## Post-Traumatic Growth and Autonomy

Given that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is common among North Korean refugees, the scarcity of research on post-traumatic growth among this population is surprising. Broadly defined, post-traumatic growth refers to a positive transformative process whereby the individual experiences global changes in their conception of self, worldview, and outlook on life (Joseph, Murphy, & Regel, 2012). Post-traumatic growth is believed to occur in relation to the individuals' struggle with their perceived ability to cope, rather than with the traumatic memory itself (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Further, individuals who have achieved post-traumatic growth are able to successfully co-exist with their distress, rather than seeking to eliminate it (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Researchers have identified that the relationship between PTSD and post-traumatic growth among Tibetan refugees is mediated by cognitive and emotional regulating factors, including positive refocusing, putting into perspective, and refocusing on planning (Hussain & Bhushan, 2011). Post-traumatic growth has also been negatively associated with reduced social support, unemployment, and poor social integration among refugees residing in Norway (Teodorescu, Siqveland, Heir, Hauff, & Wentzel-Larsen, Lien, 2012).

The psychosocially complex situation encountered by North Koreans re-settling in South Korea is underpinned by a pervasive sense of newfound autonomy. North Koreans have come from a society regulated by the *Juche* ideology; which emphasises, group-based strivings, strict conformity to dictates imposed by the Korean Workers Party, and constant exposure to political propaganda (Lee, 2003). Many North Koreans have no say in key aspects of their life such as employment, place of residency, and the right to a motor vehicle (Lankov, 2014). Thus the highly progressive, individualized nature of South Korean society is markedly different to the ways of life within North Korea. Given that post-traumatic growth is enhanced by social support and a sense of belonging (Joseph et al., 2012), it is important to investigate the extent to which a newfound sense of autonomy among North Korean refugees, and the experience of a contrast between life in the two Koreas enhances or impedes post-traumatic growth. While evidence suggests that North Korean refugees do indeed experience adjustment difficulties upon arrival (Kim et al., 2011), and years after arriving in South Korea (Yu & Jeon, 2008; Um et al., 2015), there is no research exploring specific attitudes and experiences of autonomy, and how these relate to post-traumatic growth. This research may be important in informing psychosocial interventions that aim to enhance post-traumatic growth among North Korean refugees.

## Psychological Grit and Hardness

Research has increased our understanding of how certain personality factors and thinking styles are associated with better mental health outcomes and socio-cultural functioning for individuals experiencing psychological trauma. Psychological grit refers to an individual's tendency to persevere through adversity in order to achieve long-term goals (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007). Individuals who are gritty display persistent interest in achieving their goals, even when faced with considerable obstacles (Duckworth et al., 2007), and have a greater ability to make meaning out of their lives (Duckworth & Gross, 2014). Indeed the process of making meaning out of life is a crucial aspect of post-traumatic growth, and facilitates positive psychological changes (Blalock, Young, & Kleiman, 2015). Grit has recently been shown to buffer the relationship between negative life events and suicidal ideation (Blalock et al., 2015), and has recently been associated with greater engagement in health behaviours (Reed, Britschet, & Cutton, 2013) and greater retention in dangerous military settings (Eskreis-Winkler, Shulman, Beal, & Duckworth, 2014). Thus, individuals with high levels of grit are likely to persevere during difficult situations, generate meaning from their difficulties, and engage in positive behaviour changes. No research to date has explored grit among North Korean refugees. This may be an important area of research, given that many North Korean refugees content with daily adversities such as unemployment, post-traumatic stress, bereavement, and depression. Further, given the protective role of grit against suicide, it may be important to identify factors associated with increased grit among this group. Identification of such factors may have treatment

implications for North Korean refugees.

Hardiness refers to an individual's tendency to adapt to, or resist stress (Lambert Jr & Lambert Jr, 1999). Hardiness involves the three distinct facets of control, commitment, and challenge. Specifically, individuals with high levels of hardiness feel they can influence outcomes, possess an exploratory attitude toward living, and are motivated to pursue a meaningful life (Lambert Jr & Lambert Jr, 1999). Hardiness plays a protective role against the development of PTSD (King, King, Fairbank, Keane, & Adams, 1998). Further, hardiness has been associated with reduced psychological burden following combat stress among Afghan soldiers (MAPsS, 2004), and the use of active, problem-focused coping strategies among problematic alcohol users (Maddi, Wadhwa, & Haier, 1993).

Hardiness has been viewed as having similar benefits to post-traumatic growth, in the sense that hardy individuals thrive and generate meaning from adversity (Lambert Jr & Lambert Jr, 1999). There is currently no research exploring factors associated with hardiness among North Korean refugees. Due to the importance of hardiness in facilitating outcomes observed in post-traumatic growth, its negative association with PTSD, and its link with increased problem-focused coping, it is important to investigate the association of this construct with positive psychological outcomes among North Korean refugees.

## Experiential Avoidance

Experiential avoidance is a behavioural regulation strategy that refers to an unwillingness to experience thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations (Hayes, Strosahl, Wilson, & Bissett, 2004). Experiential avoidance is a maintaining factor in psychological disorders such as depression, the anxiety disorders, and PTSD. Specifically, experiential avoidance has been associated with greater symptom severity among trauma survivors with PTSD (Marx & Sloan, 2005). Experiential avoidance has also been associated with greater distress, and reduced quality of life among survivors of the Kosovo War (Kashdan, Morina, & Priebe, 2009).

Experiential avoidance has been addressed therapeutically through Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). The positive changes observed through ACT have been measured with the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire, which assesses an individual's willingness to embrace the full range of emotions, engage in productive, meaningful activities, and reduce their struggles with internal experience (Kashdan et al., 2009). The rationale of ACT is not necessarily to help individuals become symptom-free, but rather to assist them in changing their problematic relationship with internal experiences (Hayes et al., 2004). ACT may be appropriate for North Korean refugees, due to the fact that many among this group experience persistent thoughts and feelings relating to trauma, their capacity to cope, and family members who were left behind in North Korea. It would be useful to establish whether interventions such as ACT that reduce experiential avoidance lead to greater quality of life and reduced psychological burden among North Korean refugees.

## Conclusions

North Korean refugees may experience persistent mental health concerns after departing from their home country. Trauma is a common concern among North Korean refugees, and arises from the extreme adversity these individuals have faced within their home country, during the escape journey, and when adjusting to life outside of North Korea. It is therefore important to identify psychological factors that are associated with greater socio-cultural adaptation, enhanced quality of life, and reduced psychological burden among this group. Given the severity of trauma often reported by North Korean refugees, it may be more appropriate to explore how these individuals can achieve a meaningful and purposeful existence, as opposed to living 'symptom-free'. Post-traumatic growth is one avenue through which North Korean refugees may obtain the capacity to co-exist with the burden of trauma, though there is a scarcity of research investigating factors involved in the onset, maintenance, and outcomes of post-traumatic growth in this population. Personality traits such as grit and hardiness may also predict positive outcomes among North Korean refugees, although it is unknown how North Korean refugees may develop these traits and indeed whether these traits are predictive of enhanced socio-cultural adaptation and reduced psychological burden. Further, it is unknown how North Koreans make sense of their newfound autonomy, upon arriving in South Korea, and where this sense of autonomy fits within the scaffold of post-

traumatic growth. Thus it is the authors hope that the factors highlighted in this paper will spark further research into the unique experiences of North Korean refugees; with a focus on growth rather than symptom burden.

Conflict of interest: None.

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