Trauma and Extended Separation from Family among Latin American and African Refugees in Montreal

CÉCILE ROUSSEAU, ABDELWAHED MEKKI-BERRADA, AND SYLVIE MOREAU

ALTHOUGH the vast majority of refugees have suffered trauma and extended separation from their families in exile, little is known about the interactions between these two types of experience. The qualitative and quantitative analyses of data gathered from 113 refugees from Latin America and Africa suggest that the joint occurrence of trauma and separation has a significant impact on emotional distress and confirm that the family plays a key role as an anchor of emotion and identity.

Families faced with a situation of radical change like migration need to adjust to change and provide family members with a feeling of continuity despite the internal and external pressures at work on the family unit (Cornille 1993; Settles 1993). In Canada, as in many other industrialized societies, the ability of immigrant families to adapt has always been an important issue (De Santis and Ugarriza 1995; Legault 1994; Sabatier 1991), but it is becoming particularly crucial for refugees because of the specific challenges that their families have to face both in the premigration period and during resettlement in the host country. In the literature on refugees, family separation is identified as a key aspect of the migration process (Alley 1982; Beiser 1988; Ganesan, Fine, and Yilin 1989). The separations experienced by refugees differ from those of regular immigrants by virtue of their involuntary,

hasty, and often traumatic nature (Barudy 1989; Gilad 1990; Stein 1985), as well as the fact that the resettlement process can often drag on for a long time owing to the host country's legal and administrative policies and bureaucratic red tape (Frecker 1995).

Examinations of the impact of the trauma and separation experiences on the mental health of refugees have most often focused on two concepts: bereavement and posttraumatic reaction. A few authors have argued that these two phenomena cannot be studied in parallel and that when they occur together the effects of loss, especially separation, and trauma compound each other. The interaction between separation and trauma has been seen most often in unaccompanied children and adolescents (Ressler, Boothby, and Steinbock 1988), and although it has also been reported in adults it has not been studied much (Baker 1992). The literature shows that being with their immediate and extended family and social group can have a protective effect on trauma victims (Tsoi, Gabriel, and Felice 1986). The types of trauma that have been considered are essentially personal, and little attention has been paid to the more specific effects of family trauma. Other work has underscored the impact on family equilibrium of posttraumatic disrupted attachment, which sometimes causes a family to split up or turns

Cécile Rousseau, MD, is associate professor of psychiatry, McGill University, Abdelwahed Mekki-Berrada, PhD, and Sylvie Moreau, MA, are community researchers at the Table de concertation pour les immigrants et les refugiés. Montreal Quebec, Canada.

Address correspondence to Cécile Rousseau, Psychiatry Department, Montreal Children's Hospital, 4018 St. Catherine Street West, Westmount, Quebec, H3Z 1P2, Canada; phone: 514-934-4449; fax: 514-934-4337; E-mail: Micr@musica.mcgill.ca.

an inevitable separation into a source of inner conflict (Saporta and Van der Kolk 1992).

For refugees who have had traumatic experiences, extended separation from family members may serve as a continuing link to an unbearable past, which translates into painful episodes of reliving experiences associated with news or lack of news from the family. In those who have internalized the idea that there is no future other than repetition of the trauma, separation may also destroy hope. Refugees' concern for the fate of the families they have left behind, whether at home or in refugee camps, is thus tied to the traumatic experience and seems to have a significant impact on their degree of distress (Beiser 1988; Gilad 1990; Williams 1990). Refugees repeatedly, sometimes obsessively, express guilt at having left their families behind, and their fear of reprisals and threats looming over the family (Rousseau 1990).

Although all refugees who have lived through war, internal armed conflict, or repression are labeled on the basis of this specific migration experience, they come from vastly different cultural backgrounds that provide different personal and collective frameworks for interpreting events like separation and trauma and for determining a variety of effective coping strategies (Eisenbruch 1992; Shapiro 1995; Summerfield 1998; Zarowsky 1997). The personal, family, and collective meanings associated with trauma and separation may well have a strong influence on their interaction, which can therefore be understood only within a specific political, historical, and cultural setting. Culture also structures the family relations and the role of its members. These are challenged in an exile situation where other family models are proposed and where gender role and parent-child interaction are different (Camino and Krulfeld 1994). Refugees thus face the combined burden of adapting to this new environment while working through the family turmoil created by the experience of separation.

This article is based on the data from a survey conducted to determine the impact of immigration policies of Western countries like Canada on the mental health of refugees (Moreau, et al. 1999). The survey looked particularly at the influence of separation from family—which is often lengthy as a result of the legal and administrative procedures involved in family reunification programs—in groups of refugees coming from two different geocultural zones. Intermediate variables that might mitigate or aggravate the effect of separation have previously been assessed and include premigration trauma, language, employment situation, and socioeconomic status. The description of the separation process and its perception is available in an earlier publication (Moreau et al. 1999). This article focuses on the relationship between separation from family and trauma and seeks to answer the following two questions: (a) Does the interaction between premigration personal and family trauma and extended separation from the family have an impact on refugees' degree of emotional distress? and (b) What personal and family mechanisms might explain the interaction between separation and trauma in refugee groups coming from contrasting contextual and cultural backgrounds?

The original hypothesis behind the survey was that refugees who had experienced premigration trauma would be more affected by prolonged separation resulting from the migration process than would refugees who had not experienced such trauma, because of the prolonged vulnerability induced by trauma and of the possible cumulative effects of those stresses.

Because culture provides a structure for family relations and an interpretative framework for extreme events like trauma and separation, we also hypothesize that in comparable traumatic situations culture would affect both the consequences of family separation and the strategies put forward by the family members to cope with this separation.

METHOD

Sample

The sample consisted of people who had sought help from community organiza-

tions providing services to refugees or immigrants in the Montreal area and, through a "snowball strategy," of others referred by them. Although this sampling method limits the generalizability of the findings, using a list of refugees provided by the immigration department might have created a more serious selection bias, because many refugees perceive government authorities and institutions as essentially repressive or corrupt and avoid, as much as possible, any contact with them for fear that this would hinder their application for refugee status or permanent residency.

Subjects were selected on the basis of three criteria. First, they had to be from Central or South America (Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, or Peru) or Africa (Ghana, Congo, or Rwanda). Refugees from these two geocultural regions were selected because fairly high numbers of them have settled in Canada and their homelands have seen prolonged political and military conflict. In addition, these refugees formed a large proportion of the clients served by the community organizations through which we recruited the subjects for the study.

Although the refugees from the two regions had fairly comparable experiences of organized violence in terms of intensity, there is obviously considerable contextual and cultural heterogeneity within each regional group. For this reason, we have used the quantitative data for the overall sample chiefly to describe the migration context, while drawing on the qualitative data about the relatively homogeneous national subgroups (Congo and El Salvador) to discuss the influence of a shared historical and political context on the experience of separation.

Second, selected participants had to be between 20 and 65 years old, and all had to have a nuclear family as defined by Western standards (i.e., spouse and/or children).

Finally, all participants had to be asylum seekers who had applied for refugee status at the Canadian border. Although the majority had already been granted refugee status, some were still waiting for a hearing before the Immigration and Refugee Board.

Of the 153 people who met the criteria, 118 (77%) agreed to take part in the study. We had to exclude 5 of the 118 subjects from the quantitative analysis because our information on them was incomplete. The final sample therefore consisted of 113 subjects: 60 Latin Americans and 53 Africans. We have too little information on potential subjects who declined to take part in the study to be able to compare their profile with that of those who did take part. The community organizations involved in the project had to overcome enormous resistance on the part of the refugees, who at first were very fearful that the research would have a negative impact on their families still abroad. Later, the feeling of helping in some small way to change the situation through research led the refugees to be extremely open in the interviews.

The study was done in two parts. First, we conducted semistructured interviews with all the subjects and administered instruments to measure mental health variables. The interviews took place in French, English, or Spanish, as the subject preferred. The ethnic match between the interviewers and the subjects was established following the recommendations of key informants from the regions studied. Latin American refugees preferred to have Latin American interviewers, whereas African refugees preferred an immigrant interviewer from another continent who would have a personal experience of minority status while being far enough from their community to ensure confidentiality. All the African subjects spoke very good French or English, despite the fact neither language was their mother tongue; they chose not to be interviewed in their primary language because of the same confidentiality concerns. Next, life stories were related by 20 Salvadoran and Congolese subjects who had been interviewed in the first part of the study and whose family situations (separated, reunited, migration as a family) represented the different situations encountered by the subjects.

Assessment of Variables

Mental Health Problems. The emotional profile of the subjects was measured using the most recent version of the Symptom Checklist

(SCL-90R; Derogatis 1977), which consists of 90 items describing a wide range of psychopathological symptoms and has often been used in transcultural settings. The French, English and Spanish versions were provided by Derogatis. Of the several scores possible with the Derogatis scale, we used the global severity index, which is the mean of the scores for valid items (i.e., those for which a response was obtained from the subject). The internal consistency of that index for our sample is satisfactory, although the high alpha (.95 for the Latin American subjects and .96 for the Africans) suggest that some items are redundant.

Trauma. We have defined trauma as a set of extraordinary, stressful events, directly associated with the context of war or armed conflict in the refugee's homeland. Trauma is thus distinct from traumatic response, which is here assessed in terms of a wide range of possible symptoms, not in terms of posttraumatic stress syndrome, as defined in the fourth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, the transcultural validity of which we find questionable on several points (Becker, Weine, Vojvoda, and McGlashan 1999; Eisenbruch 1988; Rechtman 1992; Richman 1993).

Trauma is considered to be personal when experienced by the subject directly, as when the subject was threatened with death, imprisoned, or tortured. Family trauma refers to the same events but experienced by members of the respondent's family, as he or she defined it. (We felt it was important not to limit it to the nuclear family, given the frequency and severity of attacks on extended family.)

To measure trauma, we adapted an instrument developed in the course of prior research with Latin American and Southeast Asian subjects (Rousseau, Corin, and Renaud 1989; Rousseau, Drapeau, and Corin 1997). Trauma scores are based on a list of several different types of trauma reported by reliable key informants from the same region and that might have been experienced before or during migration in time of war or armed conflict. Because some types of trauma are more severe than others, we decided to weight the trauma scores based on our earlier studies in this field (Rousseau et al. 1989). The top weight (5) was assigned to execution, torture, permanent disappearance, and witnessing an act of violence committed against a family member; the minimum weight (1) was assigned to general persecution, threats, and hiding to avoid abuse. Other types of premigration trauma were weighted 3.

We assessed trauma experienced by the subject directly and by his or her nuclear and extended family to create three weighted scores: (a) personal trauma score; (b) family trauma score; and (c) total trauma score, which combines the first two scores.

Separation. Legally, family reunification in Canada comes under the federal Immigration Act, which de facto limits the immediate family to the spouse and children aged 18 and under, through the financial conditions imposed on the sponsorship of any other member. We documented the subject's family situation at the time of the interview on the basis of the legal definition of immediate family used by Canadian immigration authorities because the legal and economic constraints influenced the reunification expectations of the refugees. They did, however, express bitterness with respect to the limitations imposed by such a Western definition of family (Moreau et al. 1999). We distinguished among reunited families, partially reunited families, separated families, and families that arrived together, noting the length of any separation.

Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative analysis is descriptive; our bivariate analyses are limited to a comparison of the mean global severity indices and a comparison of Spearman rank correlation coefficients between trauma scores and global severity indices. These comparative analyses were performed according to ethnic origin and family reunification status at the time of the interview and based on t test for means comparison and z tests for correlations comparison. The relatively small sample size and the complexity of the concepts measured lead

us to interpret cautiously quantitative data, which were used mainly to strengthen the qualitative data.

Qualitative Analysis

Although quantitative analyses may indicate a general pattern of interaction, they usually provide little or no information on the processes and mechanisms underlying the concepts being investigated. To enlarge the data obtained through a questionnaire, we collected life stories from a representative subsample. The subjects generally spent 2 or 3 hours relating their life stories, either at home or in a community center, as they preferred. The sessions were organized to cover several main themes, working from the past through the present and future: concept of the family, past and current family history, expectations of the future, concept of time (especially with respect to separation), personal and collective sociopolitical history, strategies for adapting to the host country. The interviewers respected the subjects' wishes to avoid certain topics or, on the contrary, to develop certain ideas. Each life story was then transcribed in the language used by the subject.

For this article, we conducted a content analysis of the transcribed interviews, looking at what the subjects said about trauma and separation and their impact. Special attention was paid to the place of trauma and separation in the subject's life journey and the degree of interaction between the social and political sphere and the family and personal sphere. To illustrate the interaction between sociopolitical trauma and extended separation from family in refugees of two different backgrounds (Congolese and Salvadoran), we have selected four stories (two of people separated from their entire families and two of people who arrived with or have been reunited with their families) that we feel highlight key elements that appear to have a central place in the stories of the subjects from Congo and El Salvador. In the discussion that follows, we refer to information from other life stories to underscore what was said or offer additional insights.

RESULTS

Quantitative Analysis

The Latin American and African subjects were similar in age (μ = 39 and 38 years, respectively; p = .411), sex (62% and 68% men, respectively; p = .488), employment status (78% and 74% unemployed, respectively; p = .555), and marital status (65% and 55% married, respectively; p = .265). Marital status referred to the present legal status of the subjects, who could in fact be living in unrecognized common-law or traditional marriages. Figure 1 shows a breakdown of the sample by sociodemographic characteristics.

The two subsamples differed, however, with regard to immigration status at the time of the interview (p < .000). More Latin Americans (62%) than Africans (40%) had obtained permanent resident status, which may partly be due to the fact that the Latin Americans had been in Canada longer than the Africans (μ = 54 months vs. μ = 40; p = .040). The Africans were better educated than the Latin Americans (p = .018), spoke French or English better (p < .000), and more often lived alone (p = .047), whereas the Latin Americans more often lived in a household that included people beyond their nuclear family. There is no statistically significant association between the global severity index of the SCL-90R and the sociodemographic characteristics that distinguish the Latin Americans from the Africans. The combination of these characteristics might have an influence on the emotional profile, but sample size limitation did not allow us to perform multivariate analysis.

Personal trauma profiles were different depending on the subjects' continent of origin, especially with regard to the more severe types of trauma. Although a majority of both Latin American and African subjects reported being victims of harassment or threats or witnessing acts of violence, the Africans reported more incidents of imprisonment or torture. Africans also reported more family trauma (executions or disappearances) than did the Latin American subjects (see Table 1).
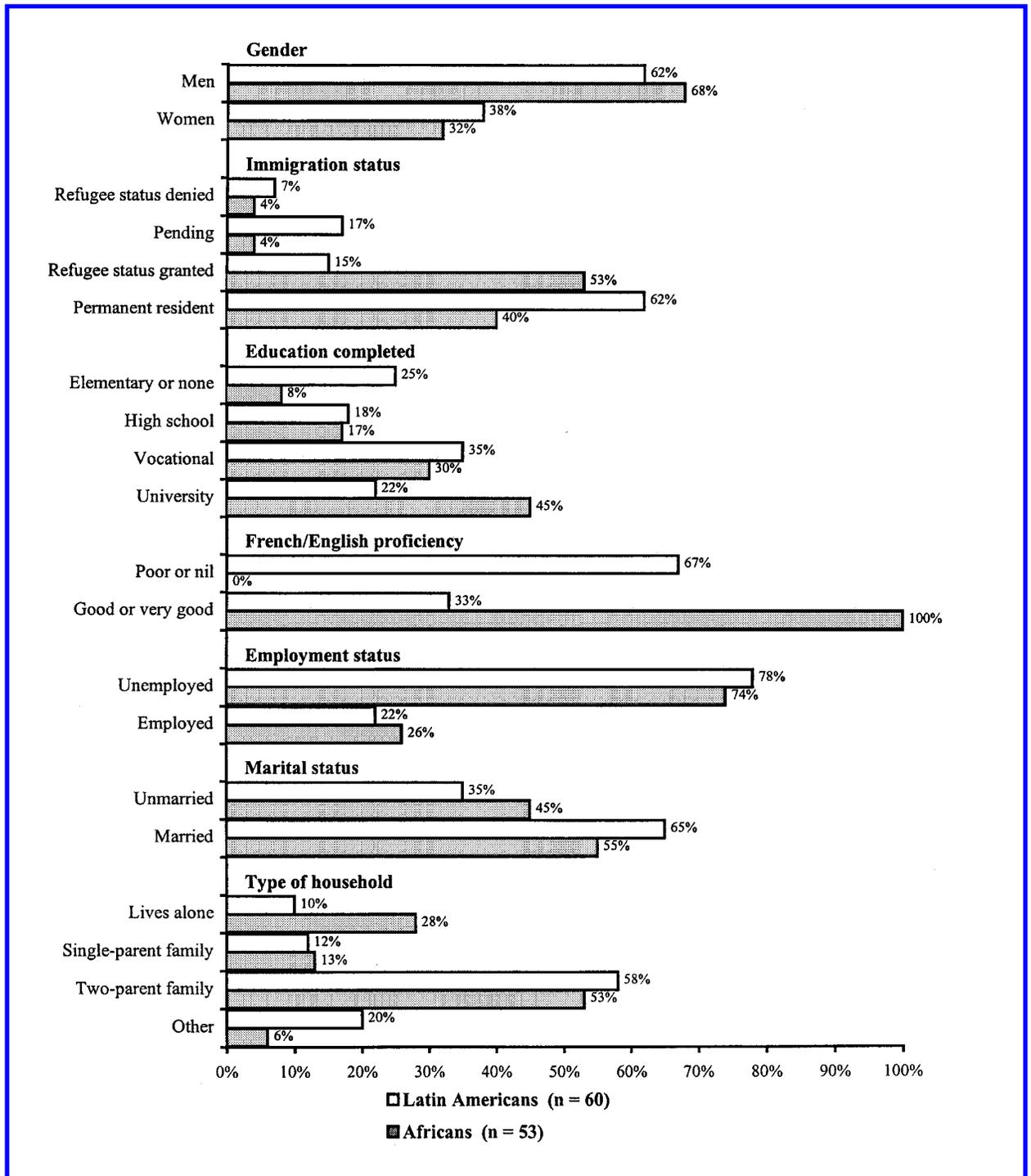
The African subjects had higher mean

Gender

Men — 62% (Latin Americans), 68% (Africans)

Women — 38% (Latin Americans), 32% (Africans)

Immigration status

Refugee status denied — 7% (Latin Americans), 4% (Africans)

Pending — 17% (Latin Americans), 4% (Africans)

Refugee status granted — 15% (Latin Americans), 53% (Africans)

Permanent resident — 62% (Latin Americans), 40% (Africans)

Education completed

Elementary or none — 25% (Latin Americans), 8% (Africans)

High school — 18% (Latin Americans), 17% (Africans)

Vocational — 35% (Latin Americans), 30% (Africans)

University — 22% (Latin Americans), 45% (Africans)

French/English proficiency

Poor or nil — 67% (Latin Americans), 0% (Africans)

Good or very good — 33% (Latin Americans), 100% (Africans)

Employment status

Unemployed — 78% (Latin Americans), 74% (Africans)

Employed — 22% (Latin Americans), 26% (Africans)

Marital status

Unmarried — 35% (Latin Americans), 45% (Africans)

Married — 65% (Latin Americans), 55% (Africans)

Type of household

Lives alone — 10% (Latin Americans), 28% (Africans)

Single-parent family — 12% (Latin Americans), 13% (Africans)

Two-parent family — 58% (Latin Americans), 53% (Africans)

Other — 20% (Latin Americans), 6% (Africans)

☐ Latin Americans (n = 60)

▨ Africans (n = 53)

Figure 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of sample.

TABLE 1
Personal or Family Premigration Trauma

Types of Trauma	Latin Americans ($n = 60$)		Africans ($n = 53$)	
	Personal[a] (%)	Family[b] (%)	Personal (%)	Family (%)
Witnessing acts of violence	73	0	79	0
Threats	60	42	55	49
Harassment	45	43	62	51
Living in hiding	27	20	32	11
Imprisonment	13	18	51	40
Physical abuse	13	5	4	8
Torture	8	20	40	30
Execution	N/A	20	N/A	42
Temporary disappearance	N/A	13	N/A	17
Permanent disappearance	N/A	12	N/A	36
Forced labor	0	3	4	8
Other	0	0	13	4

Note. N/A = not applicable.
[a]Premigration trauma sustained by subject himself/herself.
[b]Premigration trauma sustained by the subject family.

personal trauma scores ($\mu = 10.7$) and family trauma scores ($\mu = 12.5$) than the Latin Americans did (personal trauma: $\mu = 6.9$; family trauma: $\mu = 5.7$), both *p* values <.000.

Family Situation on Arrival: Separation Status. Most respondents had arrived in Canada alone: 80% came without their spouse and/or children; among these 62% were separated from their entire family, whereas 18% were only separated from part of the family. More specifically, 59% of respondents arrived without their spouse, 58% without any of their children, and 8% with only some of their children. Only 20% of our respondents arrived in Canada with their spouse and all their children. The situation was fairly similar for both the Latin Americans and Africans (Figure 2).

On their arrival in Montreal or elsewhere in Canada, 23% of the Africans and 50% of the Latin Americans were accompanied by some members of their extended family. Spontaneous answers to open questions about separation showed that beyond the immediate family, separation from members of the extended family (mother, father, brother, sister, nephew, cousin, etc.) is also frequently considered to be very significant. Among peo-

ple from Central and South America, mothers and fathers were most frequently mentioned, followed by brothers and sisters. For Africans, brothers and sisters were the family members respondents most frequently wished to bring over, then fathers and mothers, nephews and cousins. But people often remain quite realistic about the chances of reuniting the extended family in the host country. One Congolese man commented: "If I can't even bring over my children, how can I think about my mother! It's hard. It's rather hard to bring someone here."

Changes in Family Situation: Separation Status at Time of Interview. After several years, a high proportion of refugees were still living apart from their spouse and children. At the time of the interview, 68% of the respondents who had not been accompanied by their immediate family on arrival were still separated from all or some of them, and only 32% had been reunited. Yet the vast majority of those still separated had been accepted as refugees or permanent residents. The average length of the separation was 3½ years. Spouses tend to be reunited more quickly than parents and children: 48% of respondents were still sepa-
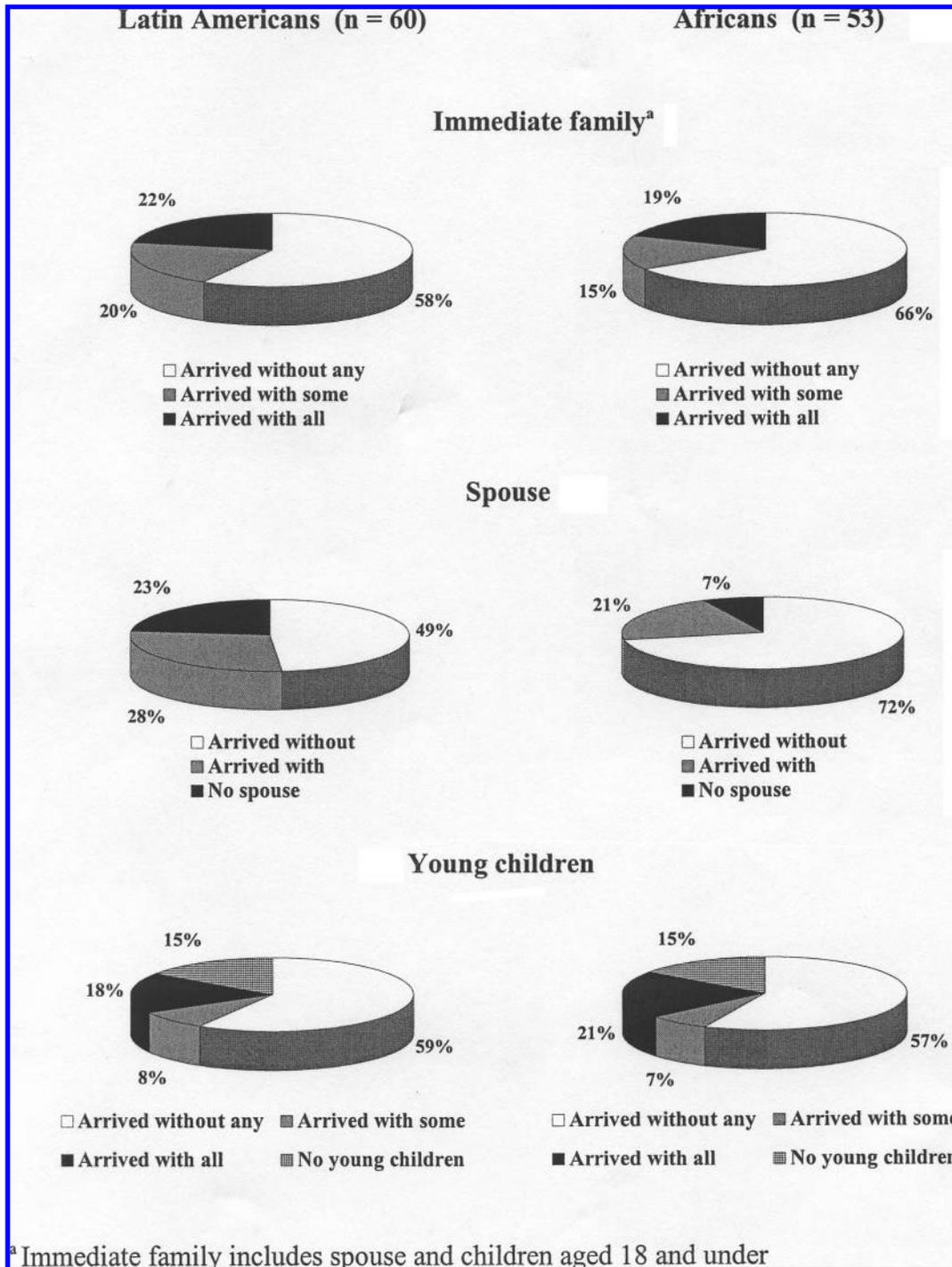
Latin Americans (n = 60)   **Africans (n = 53)**

Immediate family[a]

Latin Americans:
22%
20%
58%

☐ Arrived without any
▨ Arrived with some
■ Arrived with all

Africans:
19%
15%
66%

☐ Arrived without any
▨ Arrived with some
■ Arrived with all

Spouse

Latin Americans:
23%
49%
28%

☐ Arrived without
▨ Arrived with
■ No spouse

Africans:
7%
21%
72%

☐ Arrived without
▨ Arrived with
■ No spouse

Young children

Latin Americans:
15%
18%
59%
8%

☐ Arrived without any   ▨ Arrived with some
■ Arrived with all   ▨ No young children

Africans:
15%
21%
57%
7%

☐ Arrived without any   ▨ Arrived with some
■ Arrived with all   ▨ No young children

[a] Immediate family includes spouse and children aged 18 and under

Figure 2. Family separation status on arrival in Canada.
[a]Immediate family includes spouse and children aged 18 and under

rated from their spouse at the time of the interview, whereas 70% of those who were without their children on arrival were still without them.

Those who had been reunited endured an average of 17 months without their spouse and 42 months without their children. This great discrepancy seems to be due to the fact that most of those reunited, whether they arrived before or after 1989, did not use the government's family reunification process and had managed to bring their spouse to Canada on their own; but this seems to be a less frequent method for bringing over children, given the risks inherent in a trip of this nature, with uncertain conditions and many pitfalls along the way. Thus, for example, all the African subjects who were reunited with their spouse, except for one, had brought them to Canada by their own means. The only subject whose spouse had come through the official family reunification program reported the longest separation: 69 months. The lengths of separation for the rest varied between 1 and 44 months. The spouse's decision to join the respondent in Canada, sometimes by resigning himself or herself to leaving the children behind, may also be a strategy for survival (fleeing danger) or keeping the couple together: a desperate attempt to prevent a marriage breakdown that could be caused by being apart for too long and the difficulties of being a refugee.

Trauma, Separation, and Emotional Symptoms. The correlations between the trauma scores and the SCL-90R global severity index are not significant for the Latin Americans (Table 2), but in the case of the African subjects, there is a significant correlation between premigration family trauma and the global severity index ($r = 0.36$, $p = .008$). A significant interethnic difference is also seen for correlation between the global severity index and trauma ($r = -.07$ for the Latin Americans as opposed to $r = .35$ for the Africans; $p = .01$).

When the subsamples are stratified by the subjects' family reunification status, the global severity index mean is similar across continent of origin (Table 3).

TABLE 2

Spearman Rank Correlations between SCL-90R Global Severity Index and Trauma Scores

Types of Trauma	Latin Americans ($n = 60$)	Africans ($n = 53$)
Personal trauma	−.12	.05
	$p = .350^a$	$p = .718$
Family trauma	.06	.36
	$p = .637$	$p = .008$
Total trauma	−.07	.35
	$p = .593$	$p = .010$

[a]p value of the correlation.

The relationship between trauma and emotional profile becomes clearer if family reunification status at the time of the interview is taken into account (Table 4). Personal trauma is negatively correlated with the global severity index for Latin Americans who have been reunited with part of their family ($r = -.31$, $p = .038$) but positively correlated ($r = .37$, $p = .177$) when they are separated from their entire family; the difference between these correlations is significant ($p = .001$). The correlations between personal trauma and global severity index are similar for the African subjects but are not statistically significant.

The correlations between family trauma and emotional profile do not vary significantly according to family reunification status for the Latin American subjects, but family trauma is strongly correlated with the global severity index among Africans reunited with part or all of their family ($r = .51$, $p = .002$).

Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative analysis shows that the refugee process, as a common context, powerfully shapes some similarities between the experience of the Salvadoran and Congolese families. We first discuss those convergent aspects that reflect the specificity of the migration experience itself and are similar for both communities, and then, through an analysis of life stories that highlight the differences between the two groups, we examine the ways in which the two groups make sense of their experience.

TABLE 3
SCL-90R Global Severity Index Means according to Family Reunification Status

Family Reunification Status	Latin Americans			Africans		
	p Value	μ	*n*	*p* Value	μ	*n*
With spouse[a]	.790[f]			.089		
Reunited		.54	18		.39	17
Separated		.66	11		.53	21
Not separated[b]		.54	17		.49	11
No spouse		.65	14		.96	4
With children[c]	.613			.962		
Reunited		.47	13		.54	9
Reunited with some		.65	8		.55	5
Separated from all		.69	19		.47	20
Not separated[d]		.62	11		.48	11
With immediate family	.605			.947		
Reunited		.50	17		.51	12
Reunited with some		.68	15		.47	12
Separated from all		.65	15		.55	19
Not separated[e]		.53	13		.49	10

[a]Fourteen Latin American subjects and four African subjects had no spouse (including common-law) at the time they migrated to Canada.
[b]Subjects who came to Canada with their spouses.
[c]Nine Latin American subjects and eight African subjects had no children aged 18 or under at the time they migrated to Canada.
[d]Subjects who came to Canada with all their children aged 18 or under.
[e]Subjects who came to Canada with their entire immediate families.
[f]*p* value associated with *F* statistics of variance analysis.

Impact of Separation on Individuals, Families, and Later Settlement. Those waiting to be reunited with loved ones report being tormented daily by worry about what will become of their family members still overseas. Their worry is aggravated by both the general insecurity in their homeland and more specific financial and health problems. Fear and worry mount and their emotional state become increasingly fragile, as months and years go by with a reunion no closer.

The intensity of these situations and the distress of waiting are reflected in the various accounts. Thoughts of their waiting children back home haunt refugees, who feel powerless: "They complain and think they've been abandoned. They want to come here," said a Congolese woman whose husband had been assassinated and whose children live with her mother. "They hope that one day we'll be together. Sometimes I don't dare write be-cause they are waiting for a letter that will tell them when they'll be leaving," confided a Congolese man reunited with his three oldest children but whose three youngest are waiting with his wife in Congo. Long-distance communications are generally complex due to a lack of infrastructure, the high financial cost, and the risk involved for the family in the country of origin. They may offer relief yet at the same time heighten the pain of separation when they act as reminder of the refugee's powerlessness to hasten the reunification process.

Couples from both regions were sorely tried after several months or years of separation. Some respondents even reported that they no longer wanted to see their spouses again, because they had grown apart or relations between them had become tense. In some cases the couple's relationship was already fragile and was destroyed by the real or

imagined possibility of building a life with someone else combined with the stress of separation. In others, the breakup appears to have been a way to put an end to the unbearable uncertainty.

Much less ambivalence is expressed with regard to reunification with children. Almost all refugees, who arrive without their children, whether they are under age 18 or over, wish to be reunited with them. The desire to see their children over age 18 runs up against the requirements of immigration authorities, however, who ask refugees to provide evidence of considerable financial means. This requirement clearly runs counter to the parental duties of refugee parents, who are caught between the legal definition of adulthood in Western countries and their obligation toward their unmarried children. Administrative delays, processing fees, and travel costs complicate plans for family reunification tremendously and force people to make difficult choices. They sometimes decide to bring over the youngest children while they are saving enough to bring over the others left behind. Often the choice of which children will migrate is determined by the availability of papers, whether authentic or false.

In spite of the difficulties, most families have nonetheless persevered in their efforts to be reunited. While waiting, refugees imagine the eventual reunion with their spouse or children in a variety of ways. A great majority mention almost uniquely positive aspects: "That day will be like a dream, like a bomb bursting with joy," commented a Congolese man. But others also fear that their relationship will be greatly changed after such a long separation. These fears are confirmed by the accounts of refugees who have been reunited with their children, providing a glimpse of the problems associated with reunions after several years apart. A Salvadoran man noted: "It was hard at first. My son never wanted me to get close to his mother. It was hard, especially because of the war. The children thought that I had abandoned them. They considered me to be a traitor."

Refugees separated or reunited create bonds with institutions other than the family, mostly refugee aid organizations and churches. They feel those institutions partially fill

TABLE 4
Spearman Rank Correlations between SCL-90R Global Severity Index and Trauma Scores According to Family Reunification Status

Family Reunification Status	Latin Americans	Africans
Personal trauma		
Reunited with all or part of family	−.31 $n = 45$	−.16 $n = 34$
	$p = .038$[a]	$p = .375$
Separated from entire family	.37 $n = 15$	.21 $n = 19$
	$p = .177$	$p = .382$
Family trauma		
Reunited with all or part of family	−.00 $n = 45$	.51 $n = 34$
	$p = .988$	$p = .002$
Separated from entire family	.24 $n = 15$	.28 $n = 19$
	$p = .397$	$p = .239$
Total trauma		
Reunited with all or part of family	−.20 $n = 45$	.41 $n = 34$
	$p = .177$	$p = .016$
Separated from entire family	.26 $n = 15$	.32 $n = 19$
	$p = .358$	$p = .181$

[a]p value of correlation coefficient.

the role played by the extended family in their homeland, providing help to ensure daily survival and to deal with the weight of administrative structures.

Case Studies: Salvadoran Families

Analysis of the life stories of the Salvadoran refugees interviewed, whether separated from their families or not, show frequent parallels between the sociopolitical upheaval in their country and family crises and separation. Subjects often swing back and forth between political and religious reference points, as illustrated by the stories of Rosa, who is separated from her son, and Maria, who managed to bring her three children to Canada.

Rosa. From the outset, Rosa situated the interview in a time frame between the past and the expectation of being reunited with her 6-year-old son, who is still in El Salvador: "Within an interview . . . I feel that I've been through a lot. Now I'm expecting a child, I'm expecting a child from back home."

Rosa explained that she did not have much of a childhood. Her father, an alcoholic who was in the armed forces, ignored his family. Her mother had to work day and night and had no time for her children. When Rosa was around 3 years old, she repeatedly ran away to an aunt and uncle's, and they ended up adopting her and giving her a Christian education. "I went to kindergarten. The Catholic Church protected me a great deal and I grew up normally, but I wasn't normal inside, because I didn't have my parent's affection, their love, their protection and all those things."

At church, Rosa was a member of a group called Mary's Children and went to pray at wakes and novenas. When she was about age 16, she became aware of injustices in her country, but her mother would not let her talk about them because her father was the provider.

At the age of 21, she left home for the capital, where she found a job in a hospital. She became active in the union and was for a long time considered to be an *oreja* (informer) both by her fellow workers, who believed she worked for the government, and by the government, which linked her with leftist groups. At the same time, she became a committed catechist and fell in love with a young foreign priest. "Because he was everything to me, after God came him. I never bothered about finding a fiancé until I was 30, 29, years old. Then, with the war, the bishop was killed, and I felt so alone."

Rosa's political activism cost her job, and she thought about getting more directly involved in the armed struggle by joining the FMLN (Frente Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional) revolutionary movement but hesitated because the political and military situation was so complex. "I asked God for proof, a reason for . . . because I wanted to join, I was going to die. And why should I die if there was no victory? To me, the proof was that I got pregnant. I feel a bit guilty about that, because if I hadn't gotten pregnant, I would have gone to war well armed." (She laughs.)

She enjoyed her pregnancy, although she was a little disturbed because she was not sure who the father was. When the baby was 3 months old, Rosa was jailed for her work in the hospital union. For 2 weeks, she was interrogated as they threatened to kill her and harm her son; she was isolated, blindfolded, her hands tied, and she had to listen to the screams of other prisoners being tortured. "I knew that I wasn't going to die, because the day they arrested us, I had a dream. I firmly believed that nothing would happen to me, because I had been warned in a way. I believe in my religion, in angels, too, and in God, so I was sure that nothing would happen to me."

When she was released, she prepared to flee the country. A few days before her planned departure, she decided to leave her son in El Salvador because she was afraid he might die on the journey. The child first stayed with her sister, but when Rosa learned that he was not being well treated, she paid her brother to take him in. Throughout the immigration proceedings in Canada, she has continued to feel protected by God and is confident she will obtain refugee status. Her main goal is to bring her son to Canada, and this has caused a confrontation with her

brother, who wants to keep the boy. Her ties to the child she has not seen in 5 years play a central part in her life and replace her earlier commitments: "I haven't totally lost touch, but sort of. With limits and distance, I don't get too involved in anything political, because like I said . . . I think my son will be able to grow up and everything. . . . I've realized that there are mothers who have their children and get ready and go off to work elsewhere and leave their small children. They completely lose touch with their children."

She looks forward to seeing her son again with joy but also fear: "He's my son, but he's really a new child. I have to mould him into my son, to show him the feelings I know I have for him as a mother."

She realizes that she does not really know where she is heading; ambivalent, she even questions whether her son should join her: "It would be better if I left him there."

Maria. Maria is a Salvadoran in her 40s who has managed to bring her three children to Canada. She willingly related the story of her political and religious involvement but was reluctant to go into her family history, even though she sees a clear relationship between the two: "In a way, if somebody's going to start fighting in a war, there has to be something very deep, and I think the deepest thing for everyone is family. Many women in my country were trampled on, left, and there are lots of orphans all over the place. So many people have grown up and had problems like that. And that is what created the illusion that the system in El Salvador could be changed."

Maria was the eldest of a poor family. At a very young age, she was already the one who succeeded at whatever she tried, whether at school or at work, and she was responsible for helping her mother with everything at home. She was in tremendous conflict with her mother. "She told me that I was ugly, that I was black, that no man would ever love me."

She attended several churches to pick up clothing for her brothers and sisters and herself: "If I went to doctrine they would give me vouchers."

When she was age 17, she decided to become a nun and spent several years at a seminary but then left. "I said to myself, how can I work for the poor, when my own family is poorer than all of them?"

Around age 26, she got married, an essentially painful experience. "I tell my sons that the two people who have to help a woman are her parents and her husband. Yet they are the ones that hurt me most."

Professionally, however, she rose rapidly, becoming a school principal and then a national coordinator of major programs. At the same time, she became involved with leftist organizations. Her mother soon accused her of being a guerrilla and extorted money from her by threatening to denounce her to the army if she did not pay. Nonetheless, she put her small children into her mother's care, and they grew up torn between their mother and their grandmother, who hurled the worst kinds of accusations at each other.

She was held for 9 months in La Guardia, a notorious prison in El Salvador. She was tortured and then forced to become an informer for the death squads. Her terrified husband left her while she was in prison. Once released, she lived in the mountains for over a year with her three children, sleeping wherever they could, before deciding to leave the country. "With all that I'd been through, my spirit was traumatized. My brain was about to explode." But she also said: "I was able to withstand the torture because I'd suffered a great deal in my life."

Her children, aged 7, 8, and 9, are still living with her mother in El Salvador. "I couldn't take them with me on that adventure. I saw a lot of dead children, traumatized children, or children dead of strange diseases in exile, on the road."

Once in Canada, she worked relentlessly to bring her children into the country and made huge sacrifices so she could send them money, which her mother kept. She felt guilty for leaving them. When her children finally arrived in Canada, it was not easy for them to be together again. One of her sons hit her, rebuking her for never having sent them any money. She managed to persuade them to continue their studies, which for her is synonymous with success. The Mormon faith

she has adopted, which in her opinion, can teach them what it is to be a family, is drawing the family closer together. "I think that the Lord, if God exists, can help me. And I think that I've been blessed. What happened is, because I had Communist ideas, I hadn't realized any of it—everything in life is fair."

She perceives life in Quebec as meaningless: "They just live out their lives. I don't see people here living for their ideals and struggles. People live out their lives with no purpose."

In many life stories like those of Rosa and Maria, differences in the meaning attached to extended family separations lead to conflict. Most commonly, the children find themselves caught between the parents' and grandparents' totally opposite interpretations of their family history.

"I haven't seen them [my children] in 10 years," said Pedro, who had to flee, pursued by the death squads. "At first she [my wife] put it into their heads that I had another woman, . . . and the two boys asked me, 'Is it true that you left because you had another woman?'"

Separation from children, past or present, is almost always associated with a feeling of guilt and a desire to compensate or make reparations somehow.

The main difference between subjects separated from their entire families and subjects who arrived with them or have been reunited appears to be the ability to rebuild a meaningful world in the host country, especially for those who have been severely traumatized. Many refugees separated from their families say that they feel indecisive and disoriented when they wind up alone in the host country. Rosa mentioned how she felt out of touch with her earlier commitments, and indirectly, even with her son, because he is a "new" child that she is virtually going to bring into the world again. Other traumatized subjects separated from their families say similar things: "The truth is that I've been lost ever since I got out of El Salvador. I haven't known what I wanted, or how I wanted it, or what I was going to do. . . . Even now, I'm still lost."

These people have limited or nonexistent plans for the future: "If you arrive here in the state I was in, with your head full of little birds [noise], the first obstacle you encounter, you lose all your energy and it's very hard to overcome that." They find the future hard to imagine and although their children's future is a major concern, it is, like life in general, full of uncertainty.

Among Salvadorans who arrived with their families, there is a desire to strengthen family ties, whether or not they have been damaged by the upheaval of war or migration. If political activism was a source of conflict, it is often relegated to the background and the family draws together around family or religious values, rejecting the nontraditional family models they see in the host society. They value physical proximity very highly. "When I get home, I'm with my family, and we go out together."

In a situation in which the family occupies a large place, personal traumatic experience is sometimes shunted into the background. "I don't like to live in the past. It might cross my mind, but I don't dwell on anything . . . that makes me suffer."

Although traumatic memories are often more overpowering and destabilizing in subjects separated from their families than in those reunited with their families, this is not always the case. Indeed, for some subjects who have experienced major trauma and have had extremely difficult lives marked with violence and negligence by their families, like Rosa and Maria, past adversity seems to have had a steeling effect: "I was able to withstand the torture because I'd suffered a great deal in my life."

Case Studies: Congolese Families

The life stories of Congolese subjects are facets of the story of the extended family, which often runs parallel to the history of the village, the traditional anchor point. Although sociopolitical trauma is important, it is chiefly perceived as responsible for physical health problems, whereas family upheavals, whether due to trauma and migration or to conflict, are perceived as true ruptures. Unlike the Salvadorans, the Congolese do not consider their

political and social lives to be closely linked to their family history, and these are not a frequent source of conflict within the family. The stories of Mwamba, who is still separated from his family, and Mutombo, who arrived with his family, are fairly typical of those of the Congolese subjects we interviewed.

Mwamba. Mwamba is about 50 years old. He talks about his youth and family and professional life with pleasure but finds it difficult to describe the events that led him to leave his wife and their six children. Mwamba's grandfather was the village chief, a man respected and feared, who decided to give his children, and particularly Mwamba's father, a good education. "I had the privilege of having educated parents."

Mwamba's father grew up and married in a mission settlement, and he then left for the city to find work. He soon decided that the city was not a good place for his children to go to school and sent Mwamba back to the village to stay with his (the father's) elder brother. Five or six years later, Mwamba rejoined his father in another city, where he continued his studies. Soon afterward, his mother and father separated. "It really shook me, because I am the eldest in the family."

Mwamba finished his arts degree and met his wife in the capital. He found work in a union and rose steadily. He was well known professionally, financially comfortable, and happy with his family.

When things seemed to be becoming more open and democratic in Congo, he joined a political party. The party soon had major internal problems, and Mwamba found himself in a position to criticize the leaders. As a result, he was arrested: "Everything that happened, happened. That was the start of it. I was arrested." He avoids mentioning the torture and rough treatment he suffered in prison, alluding to it only indirectly.

His fellow union members helped him get out of prison and leave the country. "I didn't come [here]; I was forced to flee." Before leaving, he managed to see his family once; they were forced to go into hiding. "I advised them, especially the boys, to be good and do what their mother said, to pray for me

a lot, and I told them I would pray for them a lot and that I was leaving as though God were taking me away."

He is very concerned about his children: "My children were so worried that it even affected their schoolwork, since they had to take refuge in the place where I was before, where I went after getting out of prison."

He has restructured his life in Canada around the hope, however faint, of bringing his family to join him. "I never used to suffer from tension, but now I do . . . because it's a problem that eats away at you. It's hard to talk about it, it's painful."

Being alone is particularly difficult; he complains of "thinking too much": "You shouldn't think a lot. You have to act like nothing is wrong. God will see to it that one day you will be with your family again. It's being alone—sometimes you could come in at midnight, or two in the morning, when everyone's sleeping, and I'd hear you. I can't sleep when I think about it."

Mwamba feels that the separation prevents him from fulfilling his duties as a father. "If it were up to me alone, I would really be with my family again, continue to do my duty until they had all had the same schooling, were married, and that would be it."

Mutombo. Mutombo is a Congolese who arrived in Canada with his wife and five children. He is the fifth child in a large, well-off family. His parents very much wanted their children to get a good education and be brought up in a Christian environment. Even at a very early age, Mutombo set great store by education and became aware of his privileged status among his friends. "I was a bit embarrassed that I had so much, and they had nothing."

Mutombo values the traditional wisdom of his village but regrets that it is not being passed on to many and may be lost. He has happy memories of his childhood and family life, although he mentions that his father was a stern disciplinarian who sought to protect his children from the influences of the capital, which was considered to be foreign.

After completing high school, he was sent to university in the United States, where

he spent several years. He met a young American woman whom he wanted to marry, but his father was opposed to the match. "It was terrible, just terrible. Papa and I didn't speak to each other for a year. It was a real rift for me. Everyone in the family condemned me."

In the end, the marriage plans did not work out, to his great relief: "Oh well, maybe God didn't want us to get married, just to avoid the worst."

On his return to Congo, Mutombo settled down, taking a job and marrying a young woman from his own tribe. At the same time, he became active in a clandestine political party that soon became the target of government repression. Mutombo was arrested three times for his political activities; his house was pillaged and he was beaten up. "After the assaults, my health became frail. I suffered from tension." During his last period of detention, he was transferred to a hospital under guard, and with the help of hospital staff, he managed to escape. He then arranged for his family and himself to flee to Canada.

They have adapted well in Montreal, but he is somewhat concerned about his children's education. "The upbringing you give them at home can be weakened from the outside, counteracted by the influence of outside friends who come from different kinds of families."

Mutombo acknowledges that having his family with him is a great support. "Coming with my family made things easier. It was easier for me, being able to continue with the same family life. So, there was no interruption for me. There was a sort of continuity." He says that for others in his community who arrived in Canada without their families, things are much more difficult, and that they constantly worry about them.

The Congolese subjects separated from their families, like Mwamba, reported feeling powerless to deal with the absurdity of the situation. "You can't live in two places for long, because I still have loved ones back home—my family, my parents. There are a lot of people in the village who never saw me again, who still hope to see me again some day."

These feelings may culminate in a feeling of lost identity. "Now I don't know what I'm doing, I have nothing to do, I'm not going to do anything now. It's as if I've been reprieved, as if I need something else before I can make a decision. I'm waiting for everyone to be here. . . . Right now I have no identity. I have no plans. I have no work. With hope . . . without hope, you can't do anything."

Worries and concerns involve both being overpowered by the past that they have tried to repress so as not to "think too much," as Mwamba says, and fears for their families far away. "They don't go to school. They can't go out in that situation, but I'm very worried. It makes me sick and I can't rest easy here."

But even if being far from their extended families and villages weighs heavily upon them, the Congolese reunited with their immediate families experience the sort of continuity mentioned by Mutombo, with the family acting as a bridge between the homeland and the host country. And although the subjects here with their families usually avoid talking about the trauma they have experienced, they seem to be less overwhelmed by the trauma than those who are alone.

In the Congolese life stories, the trauma experienced by the family is often described as much more serious than that experienced by the subject. For example, what marked Kongolo was that when he was taken away, his pregnant wife witnessed his arrest; he is still haunted by what could have happened to her. Mbuyi was imprisoned with his mother. "I saw her before I went into the cell; I saw her and then we were separated. They put me in the men's cell. That is something I've always carried around with me through life."

DISCUSSION

Our data reveal, first of all, the scope of the phenomenon of long separations from spouses and children. These experiences are far more exceptional and indeed are just as integral a part of a refugee's "natural" history as is war trauma. The pattern of family separa-

tion and its impact is fairly similar for respondents from such vastly different geocultural areas as Africa and Latin America, which suggests that the experience is common to most refugee populations. For both groups studied, marital relations were especially liable to break down when spouses were separated, while worry and fear of abandonment were the dominant themes in discussing children left behind. The length of family separations (over 3 years on average) is essentially attributable to administrative requirements and red tape in the host country. Perhaps the fact that there is greater academic interest in trauma than in separation reflects the political dimension of these phenomena: armed conflict and war trauma are seen as the violence of others (Kleinman and Kleinman 1997), whereas an examination of prolonged separations highlights Western administrative violence.

Our quantitative data suggest that for the Latin American and African refugees in our sample, the relationship between personal trauma and psychological distress is reversed when subjects are with all or part of their families, a surprising finding that could be interpreted as a methodological artifact. But before rejecting the results out of hand, it is worthwhile considering, as Solkoff (1992) or Macksoud and Aber (1996) have done, the possible steeling effect of trauma in certain circumstances. An examination of the life stories provides some interesting food for thought in this regard.

The traumatized Salvadoran and Congolese subjects separated from their entire families describe themselves as feeling more disoriented than those living with at least part of their families. They seem more overwhelmed by unspeakably painful memories, as if their solitude was a screen upon which the sights and sounds of the trauma are projected over and over.

But although the dominant concerns of the Salvadorans are guilt feelings associated with the distance from their family and their prior political involvement, among the Congolese, it is their ability to define themselves, their very identities, that seem to be undermined by the separation. The personal trauma that subjects separated from their families avoided talking about, and indirectly mentioned as being overwhelming, seemed to be more contained, although still painful, in subjects living with their families.

To the Salvadorans who have brought their families to Canada, even though they must sometimes cope with conflicts along the way, emotional proximity seems to be the most important aspect. Family relationships must be maintained or rebuilt around significant values, and there is often a return to religion and a critical stance with regard to host society models. The Congolese place greater emphasis on continuity between the past and the present worlds, and the presence of the family makes it possible to re-create a small part of the earlier world representing the extended family and village, even for Congolese who grew up in urban settings. "My children know which village I come from." To the Congolese, sociopolitical events are tempests that rage outside the family, but do not generate conflict or cause profound transformations within it.

On the basis of these observations, we can hypothesize that severe trauma resulting from armed conflict, although painful, may under certain circumstances strengthen people's ability to face adversity when going through migration and the associated losses, because, despite the difficulties, they are able to recreate a meaningful world. The connection between this ability to bounce back after trauma and a harmonious prior history is far from simple, which brings us to the strength that can develop in some people who have been extensively exposed to trauma inflicted by other human beings.

The quantitative data also suggest that family trauma is extremely important to African subjects, much more than personal trauma, even though over 40% of our African subjects were tortured themselves. The importance of family trauma is probably associated both with its frequency and severity, and with the sacredness of the family to these communities, which consider any attack on the family to be extremely serious. Although it is universally acknowledged that the persecution

of loved ones is often a much more effective method of repression than persecution of the individual, this may be particularly true in interdependent non-Western societies where the individual is not of such central importance. Implicit acknowledgment of the importance of family trauma could be associated with the fact that in some countries, families are increasingly targeted by repressive measures (Marotte 1995).

This study has methodological limitations, and caution must be exercised in interpreting the results. First, the sampling of community organization users may have skewed the sample by selecting a more vulnerable group of subjects needing greater support or, on the contrary, a group of subjects resourceful and capable enough to use the available services. Next, the small size of the sample and its fairly heterogeneous mix with regard to nationality, ethnic origin, education, and trauma experiences introduce many sources of possible variation. Last, the very characteristics of the topic being discussed, which prompt avoidance and can trigger a reliving of traumatic experiences, magnify the importance of the subject-interviewer relationship and make selecting interviewers even more touchy. The difference in our interviewers' profiles (based on recommendations of key informants, we opted for Latin American interviewers for the Latin Americans, and non-Africans for the Africans) may also have influenced the results.

Despite these limitations, our results bring up a number of issues that could serve to guide future research. One issue is the range of possible responses to trauma and particularly the need to consider both the vulnerability that may result from trauma and the strength it may impart in some cases. Indeed, since the development of the concept of victimization and the diagnosis of posttraumatic stress disorder, trauma has been perceived in North America essentially as a disability that can be attenuated and often needs to be treated (Young 1995). A few authors, however, have pointed out that even in North America not every trauma necessarily has pathological results and that for a major psychological dis-

ability to ensue is the exception rather than the rule (Yehuda and McFarlane 1995). In war situation the disability theoretical framework of trauma is increasingly critiqued by clinicians and researchers as a restrictive understanding of the trauma phenomenon (Summerfield 1998). Recent research suggest that war trauma may sometimes, paradoxically, be associated with seemingly positive consequences like an increase in prosocial behavior (Macksoud and Aber 1996), and self-perceived efficacy (Ferren 1999) or protect against risk taking behavior (Rousseau, 1999). This evidently should not be interpreted to minimize or banalize in any way the horror of war trauma but rather to uncover the complexities of personal and collective resiliency and open new therapeutic perspective.

Our data also indicate that the family plays a central role in modulating the processes that influence the aftermath of trauma. On the one hand, the family may be the target of the trauma, which triggers emotional reactions and obligations quite different from those associated with a personal trauma. On the other hand, the presence of family members sometimes seems to transform adversity into a source of strength, perhaps by aiding in the rebuilding of a meaningful universe. This strength born of personal trauma may help ensure the survival of both the family and the larger group. The family therefore appears to be an anchor for both emotion and identity, in exile, where torture victims often feel estranged and alienated (Gonsalves 1990).

Another issue is the influence of culture on the choice of strategies that help maintain coherence and continuity between the past and the present, despite all the separation and trauma experienced. Our data support the clinical literature on the subject, which indicates that a family's cultural characteristics may modulate the development of various family strategies for coping with events like trauma and bereavement, which destabilize the family's equilibrium by disorganizing the way that strong emotions are usually dealt with (Shapiro 1995).

The cornerstone of any intervention designed for these populations must be the

identification of the individual and group cultural strategies that enable people to shape their transformation as they emerge from the

extreme traumatization they have suffered at the hands of other human beings.

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