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TRAUMA RELATED PSYCHOPATHOLOGY IN UNACCOMPANIED REFUGEE MINORS

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Objectives: To present a multimodal analysis of psychopathology among African unaccompanied refugee minors (URMs) in Austria. These youths experience well documented war and flight related non-normative stressors on their way from Africa to Europe. We have previously reported 17% of PTSD, a number below expectations. We now report on trauma related personality variables which indicate that these youths are resilient but at high risk for decompensation. We tested the hypothesis that PTSD specific defenses would be high (most notably dissociation, conversion, projection, withdrawal and somatization).

Methods: Forty-one URMs participated in the study. The following standardized instruments were used: UCLA PTSD Index for DSM IV, Mini International Neuropsychiatric Diagnostic Interview for Children and Adolescents, Weinberger Adjustment Inventory, Response Evaluation Measure for the measurement of defenses.

Results: Levels of psychopathology were below previously reported levels in URMs. By contrast, all defenses previously reported as elevated in PTSD (conversion, projection, dissociation, withdrawal and somatization) showed significant increases ($p < 0.05$), putting these defenses in the 80-95TH percentile for the norm population.

Conclusions: While syndromal illness was less than expected, indicators of trauma related habitual function were all elevated. The present findings reveal that URMs manage the extreme stress of their lives by defensive self-regulation. These findings have implications for diagnosis and management.