

## BEYOND VICTIMHOOD AND STIGMATIZATION

Trauma, Ruptured Memories and Agency  
in the Context of Global Migration

## Historical trauma - shadows and cure.

## The case of Kurds from the Region of Kurdistan in Iraq

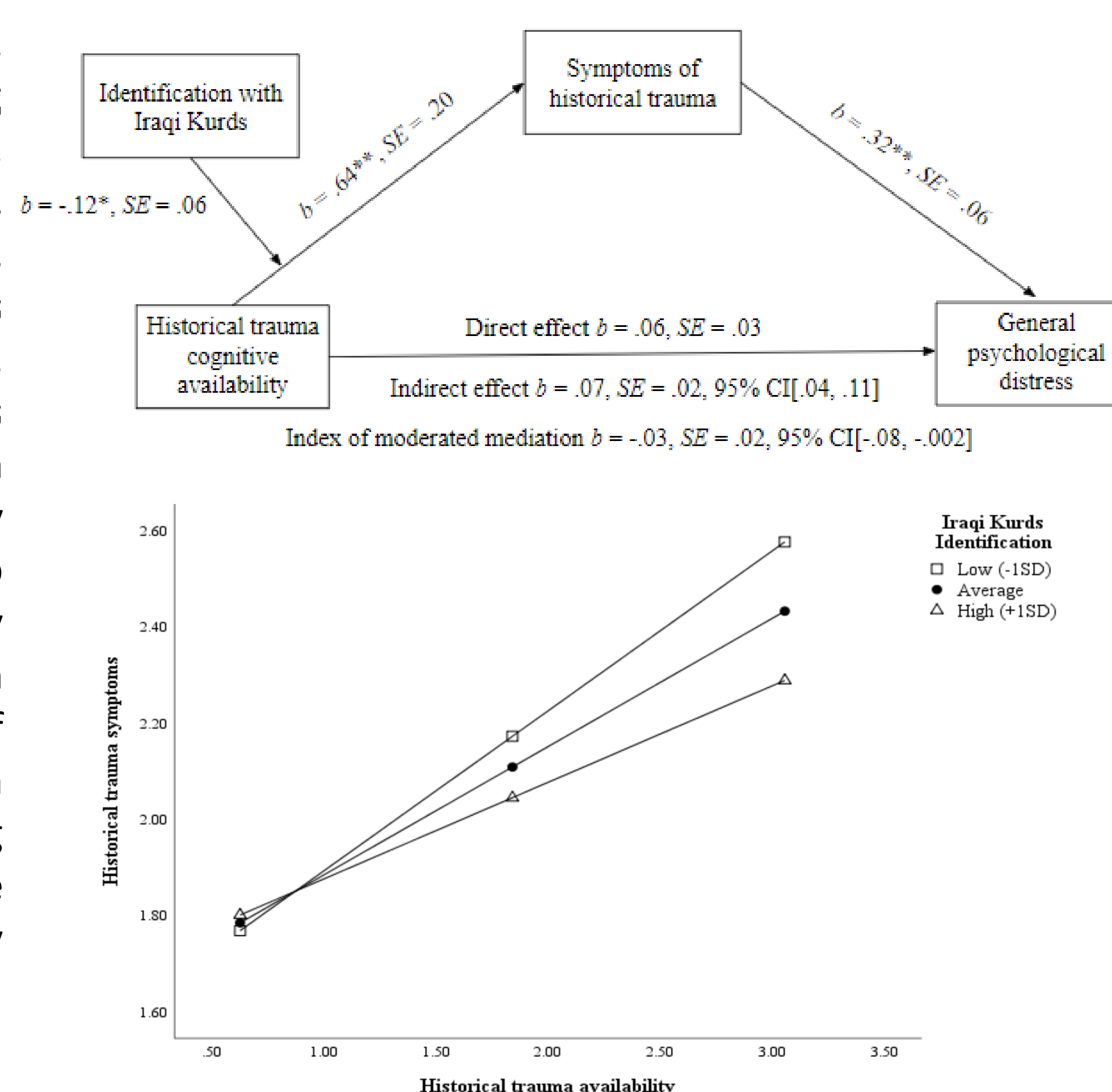
Magdalena Skrodzka, Faculty of Psychology, University of Warsaw

## Abstract

Living memories of past events, such as wars, genocides, or acts of ethnic cleansing, can have long-standing consequences for victimized societies and individuals. Descendants of the ones who have experienced trauma, even many decades after the traumatic event occurred, exhibit psychological responses to trauma reminders that negatively influence their well-being. However, group identification fosters feelings of belongingness and group support, which are essential for coping with trauma (Haslam et al., 2012). The presented study explored the potential protective role of group identification among members of a historically traumatized group – Kurds in the Region of Kurdistan in Iraq. Our results show that a higher frequency of thoughts about historical trauma is associated with negative mental health outcomes. However, strong identification with other Iraqi Kurds is attenuating the negative effect of historical trauma on present-day mental health.

## Theoretical approach with regard to trauma

Historical trauma is a legacy of numerous purposeful and destructive harms inflicted on a group of people because of their identity (e.g., ethnicity; Evans-Campbell, 2008). The impact of tragic events is manifested as psychological, social, and physical responses transferred over generations (Sotero, 2006). The concept refers to both—the actual historical events as well as to the public narration about historic traumatic events and their links to contemporary local contexts (e.g., their influence on the current functioning of a given group; Mohatt et al., 2014). The impact of historical trauma depends on the importance given to the historical traumatic events by the affected community.



## Empirical findings

Historical trauma is highly cognitively available among young adults.

Greater frequency of thoughts about historical trauma among young Kurdish adults were positively related to higher direct psychological responses as well as more severe general psychological distress.

Participants with stronger identification with Iraqi Kurds reported lower historical trauma symptoms and consequently lower psychological distress as compared to participants with the same level of historical trauma availability but weaker identification.

## Research questions

- Is historical trauma present in the thoughts of young adults?
- Does the cognitive availability of the traumatic history of Kurds have an impact on the mental state of Kurdish young adults?
- How to lower negative effects of cognitive availability of historical trauma still keeping the memory of the history of the group?
- Can strong group identification with the group help cope with historical trauma?

## Methods

The quantitative study among 224 university students in The Region of Kurdistan in Iraq.

**Historical trauma cognitive availability** (adopted to the context Whitbeck et al., 2004): participants indicated how often they think about collective loss (e.g. of land, people) caused by an enemy group.

**Historical trauma symptoms** (adopted to the context Whitbeck et al., 2004): the scale items measuring emotional and behavioral reactions directly related to historical trauma thoughts.

**General psychological distress**: measured by Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (Henry & Crawford, 2005)

**Group identification** (Cameron, 2004): participants indicated how strong connection and importance is for their identification with Iraqi Kurds.

## Summary

- The high availability of historical trauma among young Kurdish adults may highlight the importance of long-term traumatization among this group.
- Historical trauma has a significant impact on the mental state, as a consequence their everyday life.
- Strengthening identification with Iraqi Kurds may be applicable for reducing the negative effects of historical trauma.
- Knowledge of cultural and social background is necessary for therapy of traumatized groups.



## Contact

Magdalena Skrodzka  
Faculty of Psychology  
University of Warsaw

magdalena.skrodzka@psych.uw.edu.pl

## Bio

I am a last year PhD student at the Faculty of Psychology at the University of Warsaw, Poland. My doctoral project focuses on the potential maintaining and buffering factors of historical trauma. I finished postgraduate studies about Contemporary Migrations, as well as I have been involved in NGO's and institutional works toward immigrants.