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Trauma and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

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Trauma and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

Global Perspectives from the WHO
World Mental Health Surveys

Edited by

Evelyn J. Bromet

Stony Brook University

Elie G. Karam

St. George Hospital University Medical Center

Karestan C. Koenen

Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health

Dan J. Stein

University of Cape Town



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Contributors

Sergio Aguilar-Gaxiola, MD, PhD

Center for Reducing Health Disparities, University of California Davis School of Medicine, Davis, CA, USA

Jordi Alonso, MD, PhD

Health Services Research Unit, IMIM-Hospital del Mar Medical Research Institute, Pompeu Fabra University (UPF), CIBER en Epidemiología y Salud Pública (CIBERESP), Barcelona, Spain

Laura Helena Andrade, MD, PhD

Section of Psychiatric Epidemiology – LIM 23, Institute of Psychiatry, University of São Paulo Medical School, São Paulo, Brazil

Lukoye Atwoli, MD, PhD

Department of Psychiatry and Mental Health, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, Republic of South Africa

Corina Benjet, PhD

Department of Epidemiologic & Psychosocial Research, National Institute of Psychiatry Ramón de la Fuente Muñiz, Mexico City, Mexico

Evelyn J. Bromet, PhD

Department of Psychiatry, Stony Brook University, Stony Brook, NY, USA

Ronny Bruffaerts, PhD

Universitair Psychiatrisch Centrum – Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (UPC-KUL), Campus Gasthuisberg, University of Leuven, Belgium

Brendan Bunting, PhD

School of Psychology, Ulster University, Londonderry, UK

José Miguel Caldas-de-Almeida, MD, PhD

Lisbon Institute of Global Mental Health and Chronic Diseases Research Center (CEDOC), NOVA Medical School, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Lisbon, Portugal

Graça Cardoso, MD, PhD

Lisbon Institute of Global Mental Health and Chronic Diseases Research Center (CEDOC), NOVA Medical School, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Lisbon, Portugal
 Somnath Chatterji, MD
 Department of Information, Evidence and Research, World Health Organization, Geneva, Switzerland

Louisa Degenhardt, PhD

National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

Giovanni de Girolamo, MD

Istituti di Ricovero e Cura a Carattere Scientifico (IRCCS), St. John of God Clinical Research Centre, Brescia, Italy

Peter de Jonge, PhD

Department of Developmental Psychology, University of Groningen, University Medical Center Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands

Koen Demyttenaere, MD, PhD

Department of Psychiatry, University Hospital Gasthuisberg, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KUL), Leuven, Belgium

Sara Evans-Lacko, PhD

Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience, King's College London, PSSRU, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK

Matthew J. Friedman, MD, PhD

National Center for PTSD, US Department of Veterans Affairs, Washington, DC, Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth, Hanover, NH, USA

John Fayyad, MD

Institute for Development, Research, Advocacy & Applied Care (IDRAAC), Beirut, Lebanon

List of Contributors

Silvia Florescu, MD, PhD

National School of Public Health, Management and Development, Bucharest, Romania

Oye Gureje, MD, PhD, FRCPsych

Department of Psychiatry, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria

Josep Maria Haro, MD, PhD

Parc Sanitari Sant Joan de Déu, Universitat de Barcelona, CIBERSAM, Barcelona, Spain

Yanling He, MD

Shanghai Mental Health Center, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, School of Medicine, Shanghai, People's Republic of China

Steven G. Heeringa, PhD

Survey Research Center, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA

Hristo Hinkov, MD, PhD

National Center for Public Health and Analyses, Sofia, Bulgaria

Yueqin Huang, MD, MPH, PhD

Institute of Mental Health, Peking University, Beijing, People's Republic of China

Elie G. Karam, MD

Department of Psychiatry and Clinical Psychology, St George Hospital University Medical Center, Balamand University, Faculty of Medicine, Institute for Development, Research, Advocacy and Applied Care (IDRAAC), Beirut, Lebanon

Norito Kawakami, MD, DMSc

Department of Mental Health, School of Public Health, The University of Tokyo, Tokyo, Japan

Ronald C. Kessler, PhD

Department of Health Care Policy, Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA, USA

Karestan C. Koenen, PhD

Department of Epidemiology, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Boston, MA, USA

Viviane Kovess-Masfety, MD, PhD

Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Santé Publique (EHESP), EA 4057, Paris Descartes University, Paris, France

Sing Lee, MB, BS

Department of Psychiatry, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Tai Po, Hong Kong

Jean-Pierre Lépine, MD

Hôpital Lariboisière Fernand Widal, Assistance Publique Hôpitaux de Paris, Universités Paris Descartes-Paris Diderot, INSERM UMR-S 1144 Paris, France

Daphna Levinson, PhD

Mental Health Services, Ministry of Health, Jerusalem, Israel

Howard Liu, SM

Department of Health Care Policy, Harvard Medical School, Department of Epidemiology, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Boston, MA, USA

John J. McGrath, MD, PhD

Queensland Brain Institute, Queensland Centre for Mental Health Research, University of Queensland, Australia, Aarhus University, Denmark

Katie A. McLaughlin, PhD

Department of Psychology, University of Washington, Seattle, WA, USA

Maria Elena Medina-Mora, DrPH

National Institute of Psychiatry, Ramón de la Fuente Muñiz, Mexico City, Mexico

Fernando Navarro-Mateu, PhD, MD

UDIF-SM, Subdirección General de Planificación, Innovación y Cronicidad, Servicio Murciano de Salud, IMIB-Arrixaca, CIBERESP-Murcia, Murcia, Spain

Beth-Ellen Pennell, MA

Survey Research Center, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA

Marina Piazza, ScD, MPH

Universidad Cayetano Heredia, National Institute of Health, Lima, Peru

José Posada-Villa, MD

Faculty of Social Sciences, Colegio Mayor de Cundinamarca University, Bogota, Colombia

Andrew Ratanatharathorn, MA

Department of Epidemiology, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University New York, NY, USA

Sherri Rose, PhD

Department of Health Care Policy, Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA, USA

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List of Contributors

Anthony J. Rosellini, PhD
Department of Psychological & Brain Sciences,
Boston University, Boston, MA, USA

Ayelet Meron Ruscio, PhD
Department of Psychology, University of
Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, USA

Kate M. Scott, PhD
Department of Psychological Medicine,
University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand

Victoria Shahly, PhD
Department of Health Care Policy, Harvard
Medical School, Boston, MA, USA

Arieh Y. Shalev, MD
Department of Psychiatry, NYU Langone
Medical Center, New York, NY, USA

David Spiegel, MD
Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral
Sciences, Stanford University School
of Medicine, Stanford, CA, USA

Paul Stang, PhD
Janssen Pharmaceutical R&D, Titusville, NJ, USA

Dan J. Stein, FRCPC, PhD
Department of Psychiatry and Mental
Health University of Cape Town Cape
Town, Republic of South Africa

Margreet ten Have, PhD
Trimbos-Instituut, Netherlands Institute of Mental
Health and Addiction, Utrecht, The Netherlands

Graham Thornicroft, PhD
Centre for Global Mental Health, Institute
of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience,
King's College London, London, UK

Yolanda Torres, MPH, DraHC
Center for Excellence on Research in Mental
Health, CES University, Medellin, Colombia

Maria Carmen Viana, PhD, MD
Department of Social Medicine, Federal
University of Espirito Santo, Vitoria, Brazil

David R. Williams, MPH, PhD
Department of Social and Behavioral
Sciences, Harvard T.H. Chan School of
Public Health, Boston, MA, USA

Alan M. Zaslavsky, PhD
Department of Health Care Policy, Harvard
Medical School, Boston, MA, USA

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Foreword

Matthew J. Friedman

This remarkable volume represents the most comprehensive, detailed, and rigorous attempt ever undertaken to characterize the risk factors, clinical phenomenology, and global burden of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The World Mental Health (WMH) Survey Consortium has applied its powerful methodology and cross-national research network to investigate PTSD predictors, prevalence, population differences, and potential preventive strategies on such a large scale that there was sufficient statistical power to carry out many sub-analyses of great interest. Approximately 125,000 individuals were surveyed from 26 low- to high-income settings around the globe. Major topics include: the epidemiology of trauma and PTSD, factors influencing the onset and course of PTSD, the validity of the American Psychiatric Association's current diagnostic criteria for PTSD as described in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual Fifth Edition, DSM-5* (APA, 2013), and the clinical and public health implications of these findings with respect to preventive strategies and early case identification.

There is no need for me to attempt to use this brief introduction to summarize the wealth of findings presented in each chapter. Instead, I would like to focus on three major cross-cutting issues that have occupied my thoughts over the years: the global relevance of the PTSD diagnosis, the goodness-of-fit of the DSM-5 diagnostic criteria to the findings of the WMH survey, and how these findings might inform future clinical practice and public health policy.

The Cross-Cultural Applicability of the PTSD Construct

Ever since its introduction as an official diagnosis in the DSM-III (APA, 1980), PTSD has been criticized as a Western cultural construction with limited applicability to non-industrialized nations and cultures (Young, 1995; Summerfield, 1999; Jones et al., 2003;

Lewis-Fernández et al., 2014). Another criticism has been that by medicalizing human suffering, the PTSD diagnosis has obscured the social and moral implications of catastrophic events such as war and genocide and narrowed the posttraumatic clinical focus from genuine culture-specific idioms of distress to the Western DSM diagnosis (Kleinman & Kleinman, 1991; Lewis-Fernández et al., 2014).

My personal experience of the intensity of this controversy occurred when Tony Marsella and I organized a conference more than 20 years ago (Marsella et al., 1996) that sought to integrate PTSD diagnostic criteria with cross-cultural and medical anthropological constructs of trauma. To me, this seemed to be an achievable and useful undertaking. But there was intense disagreement about the appropriateness of such an initiative.

This book does not, and cannot, address the question of whether PTSD might be a more useful construct in some settings than, for example, *ataque de nervios*, *khyal*, *ihahamuka*, *llaki*, or *masilango*. On the other hand, this book does show that PTSD occurs in low- as well as in high-income countries. Although prevalence may vary from one country to the next, such variation is not necessarily attributable to whether or not such countries are Western/industrialized. Furthermore, PTSD appears to remain PTSD. In many cases, the symptom characteristics, risk factors, clinical course, associated disorders, and burden of PTSD appear to be consistent from one country to the next.

In short, thanks to these findings, we can feel confident that PTSD is not restricted to Western populations although there is significant cross-cultural variability. As Lewis-Fernández et al. (2014) point out, such variability may, in part, be due to variability in trauma exposure as well as culturally driven differences in trauma expression. Much more research is needed to understand the relationship between culture, post-traumatic distress, PTSD, and culture-specific idioms of distress. Attention to underlying pathophysiology

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and identification of posttraumatic/PTSD-related biomarkers should help to sort this out. Finally, achieving the appropriate balance between culture-specific syndromes and the universal PTSD diagnosis should enable us to optimize clinical approaches and public health preventive policies in a wide variety of settings. This important path forward should be guided by these findings from the WMH Survey.

Did DSM-5 Get It Right?

As the chair of the DSM-5 sub-workgroup that developed the current PTSD criteria, I was, of course, very interested in the findings of the WMH Survey regarding the final PTSD diagnostic criteria. Most people do not realize that, in contrast to the DSM-IV (APA, 1994) process, there was no opportunity to field test the proposed DSM-5 criteria before they were finalized. Furthermore, although DSM-5 was an empirically driven process that was based on the most rigorous research, a number of key diagnostic questions had not been investigated as thoroughly as or carefully as we would have hoped. The WMH Survey has several specific chapters that focus on DSM-5 diagnostic criteria.

One major change between DSM-IV and DSM-5 was elimination of the subjective (Criterion A2) component of Criterion A which stipulated that in addition to exposure to the traumatic event itself (Criterion A1), an individual must have experienced an intense emotional response (e.g., “fear, helplessness, or horror”). DSM-5 eliminated the A2 criterion because it had little clinical utility and did not improve diagnostic accuracy. The WMH Survey results support that decision.

Another important change was the addition of a dissociative subtype (Lanius et al., 2012). Individuals diagnosed as such meet full DSM-5 criteria for PTSD but also exhibit dissociative symptoms, such as depersonalization or derealization. There is a long history of dissociative symptoms occurring after exposure to a traumatic event dating back to the classic work of Charcot and Janet. Again, the WMH Survey supports DSM-5 by showing that the dissociative subtype distinguished a significant minority of PTSD cases, that it was present throughout a diverse set of countries, and that it was associated with considerable morbidity, chronicity, and functional impairment.

In my opinion, one piece of unfinished business from DSM-5 is the lack of a diagnostic niche for

people who suffer from extreme distress and functional impairment following exposure to a traumatic event, but who fail to meet full diagnostic criteria for PTSD. This has variously been called partial or sub-threshold PTSD. DSM-5 did not include a specific sub-threshold PTSD diagnosis because a standard case definition has never been achieved; therefore, it was not possible to pool and synthesize the growing literature on this topic. The WMH survey clearly supports earlier studies showing that traumatized individuals with some, but not all, requisite PTSD symptoms represent an important clinical population (Friedman et al., 2011). The WMH Survey’s suggestion that people who meet two or three of the DSM-5 Criteria B–E should be diagnosed as having sub-threshold PTSD is a very good place to start toward developing a case definition of sub-threshold PTSD in order to guide and standardize future research.

The WMH survey addresses the differences in PTSD diagnostic criteria between DSM-IV, DSM-5, and the World Health Organization’s (WHO) *International Classification of Disease 10th Edition* (ICD-10; WHO, 1993) and *11th Edition* (ICD-11; WHO, 2012). Although the Survey found results consistent with DSM-5 in distinguishing four PTSD symptom clusters, the most important result confirms previous findings regarding a lack of congruence between these four different diagnostic schemes. Given the differences between DSM-5 and ICD-11 (Friedman, 2013; Maercker et al., 2013), the finding that one-third of respondents met PTSD criteria only in DSM-5, DSM-IV, ICD-10, or ICD-11, but not in any other classification scheme, is very important. I believe that rather than confronting us with a conceptual problem, this is a golden opportunity to recognize that we should no longer try to fit all posttraumatic psychopathology under a single tent labeled “PTSD.” It is time to recognize that different people will express posttraumatic distress differently. Perhaps it makes sense to identify different posttraumatic phenomenological phenotypes such as adrenergic/aroused, dysphoric/anhedonic, dissociative and externalizing (Friedman, 2016). Or more likely, it is time for PTSD to evolve into a spectrum disorder (as has depression) with a variety of phenotypes that include biomarkers among its diagnostic criteria. These WMH Survey results provide strong additional evidence that identification of posttraumatic phenotypes is one of the highest priorities in this field.

Clinical and Public Health Implications

To me, the most remarkable finding is the WMH survey PTSD risk algorithm based on machine learning models. We have known for a long time that most individuals exposed to a traumatic event will not develop PTSD. The clinical and public health challenge is how to identify those individuals at greatest risk in comparison with resilient others who will not develop PTSD. During mass casualty, war, genocide, and natural disaster scenarios, the problem has been that almost everyone exhibits severe distress during the acute aftermath of a trauma, but only a significant minority will exhibit a chronic PTSD clinical trajectory. Indeed, the WMH survey found that 95.6% of PTSD cases occurred among the 10% of respondents classified by the machine learning algorithms as having the greatest predicted PTSD risk. The model includes socio-demographics, type of trauma, prior trauma history, prior psychopathology, and social support. The predictive power of future models will definitely be improved by the identification of specific biomarkers as well as by the explication of specific posttraumatic phenotypes. But as with the importance of lipid profiles in assessing the risk of cardiovascular disease, refinement of the PTSD risk algorithm will play a major role in identification and management of individuals at greatest risk for PTSD in both traditional clinical and population-based public health settings.

In closing, the WMH survey of PTSD will greatly influence the future research agenda, diagnostic assessment, clinical management, and public health strategy regarding PTSD. It is a major achievement that should be mandatory reading for anyone concerned about trauma and its consequences.

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