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Mathieu Guidère

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Linguistic Predictors of Psychotrauma in Immigrants and Refugees

Mathieu GUIDERE (INSERM / PARIS VIII)

Abstract

The prevalence of PTSD is high among immigrants and refugees, particularly those who immigrated because of armed conflict or political repression (e.g., Syria, and Iraq). Unfortunately, many immigrants and refugees with PTSD do not receive professional care due to a lack of available providers, stigma about mental illness, and other concerns. Technology-based interventions, including mobile phone apps may be a viable means of surmounting linguistic barriers and reaching and helping those in need. In using the conceptual term “predictor” rather than the more operational term “correlate”, we make no strong claim about causality; instead, our conceptual framework is more akin to a risk factor than to a causal factor.

Methods: This was a secondary report of data, including unpublished data, from an internet-delivered self-help intervention for adjustment disorder. The study included 20 participants who had completed online baseline assessments. All participants had experienced significant life stressors over the last 2 years and had high levels of adjustment disorder symptoms. The qualitative analysis of verbalizations focused on three aspects: (a) historical or static person characteristics such as family history, childhood adversity and trauma, and other previous trauma; (b) trauma severity; and (c) social support and intercurrent life stress in the interval between traumatic exposure and measurement of PTSD symptoms or the presence of the disorder.

Results: The study shows that the effects of these factors in immigrants and refugees are significant and lead to a better understanding of the development of PTSD. We found seven predictors of PTSD symptoms or of PTSD diagnosis: (a) aspects to the trauma event, (b) person characteristics for psychological processing and functioning, (c) family history of psychopathology, (d) perceived life threat during the traumatic event, (e) perceived social support following the traumatic event, (f) peritraumatic emotionality—high levels of emotion during or in the immediate aftermath of the traumatic event, and (g) peritraumatic dissociation—dissociative experiences during or in the immediate aftermath of the traumatic event.

Conclusions: The findings of the study indicated that these predictors are a valid in immigrants and refugees, and a reliable self-help test to identify negative (PTSD complaints) and positive outcomes (psychosocial functioning and resilience). Online platforms and mobile apps are an easily accessible tools that can help in immigrants and refugees who have experienced a psychotrauma to timely identify psychological complaints and find appropriate support. Finally, these tools seem to be effective and highly needed in times like the coronavirus pandemic.

Key Words

Psychotrauma, psycholinguistics, traumatic events, mental health, mobile app, self-help, online platform, resilience, PTSD, pandemic.