Long term psychosocial consequences for disaster affected persons belonging to ethnic minorities

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Preface

The fine book before you examines a number of important hypotheses that are directly related to post-traumatic stress among ethnic minorities. Widely held myths are punctured and popular beliefs are refuted by new facts.

Ethnic minorities receive a good deal of attention in contemporary scholarly social-science research. Yet, extensive scientific research into specific problems that ethnic groups face is still often lacking. For instance, until now, there has not been significant investigation into the psychosocial consequences on different ethnic groups of exposure to serious incidents or calamities.

Clinical psychologist Annelieke Drogendijk focuses her PhD study on the aftermath of the Enschede Fireworks Disaster of 2000 and the psychosocial impact of that traumatic event on the affected local ethnic minority groups. She also studies the social support experienced by groups of native Dutch and ethnic minority inhabitants of Enschede in the aftermath of the disaster. One significant finding of her research is that there may not be quite as large a difference as previously thought between the impact of disasters on native and immigrant groups. However, there is a significant difference in the ways that ethnic groups respond to disasters and utilise post-disaster support services.

The present study explores in great detail the differing psychosocial impact of disasters for several population groups. In the Fireworks disaster, which is central to this study, the long-term impact of the disaster proved to be significantly greater for the ethnic minority groups.

Not only has a comparison been made between native and non-native ethnic population groups; this study is particularly innovative in having conducted both qualitative research and quantitative surveys to establish a connection between acculturation, social support and psychosocial problems. After all, in the aftermath of a calamity or disaster, victims often have a need to connect socially and often fall back on culture-specific coping mechanisms. It is a general belief that members of collectivist, family-orientated ethnic groups in particular are in great need of familial support. However, as a result of migration this need often remains unfulfilled. The so-called “condición migrante” might cause stress by itself, but it may also constitute an additional stressor when coping with the aftermath of a disaster or calamity.
Another significant finding of Annelieke Drogendijks research is that members of collectivist ethnic groups prove to be more prone to adduce externalised explanations for psychological problems in an attempt to shield their own social group from criticism. However, these acts of external attribution may also lead to a loss of control on the part of individual victims. These typical reaction patterns have been found to run counter to the largely individual-oriented mental healthcare proffered in the aftermath of a disaster. Thus, an important recommendation offered by this study is that mental health care should be culturally competent and take (greater) heed of such factors as the collectivist dimension of ethnic culture.

With her ground-breaking research, the author of this study has provided us with important new insights, adding to our previously-scant knowledge of the impact of disasters on minority groups. It will prove to be of significance not only for the (ethnic) population groups themselves, but could also lead to development of a (mental healthcare) policy that more appropriately addresses the (after)care needs of ethnic groups.

It is with great pleasure that we present this study and share its important findings. We feel it has increased our understanding of the psychosocial problems, and care, of ethnic minorities in the aftermath of a disaster.

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