Linking post-disaster mental health to the erosion of social fabric
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Linking post-disaster mental health to the erosion of social fabric

De link tussen rampgerelateerde geestelijke gezondheid en de erosie van sociale gemeenschappen

(met een samenvatting in het Nederlands)

Proefschrift

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door Tim Rogier Wind

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te Groningen

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Preface

What social mechanisms determine the mental health impact of natural disasters on individuals and their communities? And what are the factors that control a person’s likelihood of developing psychological problems in the aftermath of such a disaster? It are these and other questions that the book you are about to read sets out to answer. As this PhD study investigates the link between social mechanisms and mental health, it introduces a new perspective on the determinants of an individual’s developing disaster-related mental health problems and discusses the implications this carries for the psychosocial interventions to be proffered in the wake of natural disasters.

To date, a great deal of research has been conducted into the ways natural disasters impact individuals and their communities, detailing both the range and the magnitude of psychological and psychiatric consequences. Yet for all the attention devoted to disaster-related mental health, researchers have tended to conceptualize these mental health problems as being determined at either the individual level or at the contextual level of the social community to which the individual belongs. Thus, a certain dichotomy has typically underlain the general view of these determinants. The present study constitutes a marked change in the thinking about disaster-related mental health as its author convincingly argues that the psychological problems experienced are not only a great deal more complex than hitherto supposed, but that their determinants should be formulated in terms of a multi- or cross-level rather than a single-level conceptualization. It is persuasively reasoned here that it is at the interface of individual variables and contextual factors interacting that the individual’s development of disaster-related mental problems is determined. Not only has the new approach of this research resulted in a more complete and correct conceptualization of disaster-related mental health but it has, significantly, also increased our insight into the link between disaster-related mental health and the social context. In addition, this study holds significant methodological consequences for subsequent disaster-related mental health research and for the interpretation of screening outcomes in terms of psychosocial interventions.
Psychologist Tim Wind’s research rests on a comparative study of two populations in a rural district of Uttar Pradesh, India, one of which is afflicted by recurrent flooding, and on a study of a population in the flood-affected town of Morpeth, in the north of England. In order to determine the impact of the flooding on the afflicted communities, Wind studied their social fabric, exploring in particular the question what mechanisms cause the fabric’s erosion in the wake of disaster and how this affects mental health. He thereby also included in his study of the communities those factors that were related to individual responses such as personal appraisals of the disaster and deployment of coping mechanisms or social support. Importantly, this inclusion of such individual factors laid bare their mediating function in the relation between a community’s social capital and mental health. Cognitive social capital proved to be negatively related to the incidence of disaster-related psychological problems, while high structural social capital was demonstrably beneficial for individually experienced post-traumatic stress. In addition, Wind explored the mechanisms at work as individuals attempt to cope with the aftermath of the disaster and demonstrated, besides some universal mechanisms, the existence of particular gender-specific mechanisms whereby men and women benefit from different components in the social context. These outcomes have led Wind to advocate the adoption of intervention policies in the wake of disasters that are both individual-oriented and community-orientated to strengthen and enhance both the objective and subjective dimensions of social capital.

What makes Wind’s study significant is the fact that with his new approach, he has succeeded in making abundantly clear the actual existence of a connection between disaster-related mental health and social context; equally significant is his finding that it is the interplay of these inextricably linked social and individual contexts that determines whether or not individuals develop mental problems in the wake of a natural disaster. Whereas earlier social capital research in this respect produced inconsistent results, the present study provides better understanding of the social mechanisms that determine psychological problems experienced in the aftermath of a disaster.

With his innovative point of departure, the author of this study has provided us with important new insights. It indicates a new direction for future disaster-related mental health research as well as for more pertinent psychosocial interventions.
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 needs of populations in disaster-struck areas, and of an important new approach to the care extended to these.

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