

Mental Health in War-Affected Populations

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Preface

The fine book before you examines the mental health situation among populations in nonwestern war-affected areas and explores community-based methodologies utilised to alleviate victims' psychological problems.

Considerable care and support have over the years been provided to stricken populations, yet only recently has the insight been developed that humanitarian help adopt a public-health approach and be community-based rather than focus on specific trauma complaints. This constitutes a marked change in the thinking about care to populations affected by war and oppression. Significantly, the findings of the present research corroborate these insights. In addition, this study constitutes a major contribution to the evolution of an effective therapy programme based on these premises.

Psychiatrist Pim Scholte's research rests on a number of studies among the war-affected populations of two widely different areas: the refugee camps in and near Rwanda set up in the aftermath of the 1994 genocidal violence, and an eastern province of Afghanistan. Scholte conducted a number of epidemiological studies to establish the incidence of mental problems among these populations. He also set up a community-based sociotherapy programme in Rwanda, measuring its effect by means of an instrument especially validated to render it crossculturally pertinent as well as utilisable in longitudinal research.

What makes Scholte's study significant—the sociotherapy programme in particular—is the fact that the methodology applied is grounded in the theoretical concept of social capital. A measurement of a population's social cohesion, social capital comprises such elements as interconnectedness, social networks, mutual trust and cooperation. While the precise relation between social capital and mental health is to this day not quite clear, qualitative research unmistakably indicates that the sociotherapy as proffered in Rwanda is not only conducive to an increase in social capital but also to a community's ability to recover from the ravages of war and oppression. Its effect on social capital was paralleled by an increase in the population's mental well-being. Crucially, this type of sociotherapy is accessible to all community members and, moreover,

is organized at the local level. This makes it adaptable to local circumstances and therefore extremely workable as well as sustainable.

With his groundbreaking research, the author of this study has provided us with important new insights. His findings point to a new direction for future therapy programs whereby requirements currently imposed as to community-based orientation, pertinence, and sustainability are all fully met.

8 It is with great pleasure that we present this study and share its findings. It has increased our understanding of the psychosocial needs of populations in postconflict settings and outlines an important new approach to postconflict psychosocial care.

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