Reviewer's report

Title: Psychological Trauma and Evidence for Enhanced Vulnerability for PTSD through Previous Trauma among West Nile Refugees

Version: 1 Date: 23 March 2004

Reviewer: Zachary Steel

Reviewer's report:

General

The authors present the findings of a study investigating trauma exposure and posttraumatic stress disorder amongst a sample of 1,849 households in the Ugandan and Sudanese populations of West Nile consisting of 3,179 completed interviews. The large population sample obtained by the authors place them in a unique position to examine the important relationship between the magnitude of trauma exposure and the development of subsequent posttraumatic stress psychiatric symptomatology.

In their introduction the authors correctly point out that the investigation of the dose-response model of trauma exposure and the development of PTSD is often unable to be adequately investigated, particularly in western civilian populations where the range of trauma exposure tends to be restricted. In contrast research amongst refugee and post-conflict populations has consistently demonstrated a robust dose-response relationship largely because there is a large degree of variability in the amount of trauma experienced.

Because of there very large sample size and the inclusion of three different ethnic groups with different levels of exposure to trauma and conflict the authors are able to examine the full implications of the dose-response hypothesis undying post-conflict understandings of PTSD. Namely, whether or not PTSD becomes and inevitable outcome if the level of exposure to trauma is sufficiently large. The findings reported by the authors provide strong support for this model with all of the individuals in the highest lifetime and 12 month trauma categories being identified with PTSD. This is a very important finding in two respects: First it provides additional support, in a new cultural group, for the dose-response model of PTSD which has increasing been challenged in recently years as culturally invalid; and Secondly the research provides some evidence to support the belief that PTSD is a normative response to extreme cumulative trauma exposure.

Notwithstanding the importance of this research there are a few issues that I think require some additional discussion or clarification in the paper:

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Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

****NONE****

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Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

1. The authors indicated that they employed a multistage sampling design but have provided little details of this, further information about the strategy employed and its representativeness should be
provided. Some discussion of response rates should also be included.
2. The authors indicated that they interviewed multiple individuals from within each household but have not adjusted their statistical procedures to take into account the clustering effect that this may produce. I do not think that it is necessary for the authors to reanalyse their results, but a note should be introduced into the text to indicate that the analysis was carried out on unweighted data that was not corrected for the effect of clustering. It would be reasonable for the authors to argue that it is not likely that this would have a substantial effect on the relationships examined in the paper, particularly given the large sample size employed.
3. Reference to chronicity of PTSD in the concluding comments should be removed as the data presented by the authors did not examine this issue.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

4. The authors indicated that they examined the validity of the PDS by comparison with diagnosis made by clinical psychologists using the CIDI SRQ but they did not provide agreement statistics between the PDS and CIDI. The paper would be enhanced in sensitivity, specificity and Kappa statistics if such statistics were reported.
5. The paper would be enhanced by the provision of a table listing the % of each trauma type experienced by the respective populations. Also some discussion of the meaning of trauma types such as “child marriage” should be included given that in some circumstances this practice may be culturally sanctioned.
6. Finally I think the paper would be enhanced by making some reference to the current debate (cf Summerfield) about whether PTSD has any cultural salience in such a post-conflict setting. The data provided by the authors clearly indicates that a set of symptoms corresponding to PTSD exists in this population and demonstrates that the prevalence of those symptoms increases in a dose-response fashion to the level of trauma reported. However, this does not answer the subsequent question about whether the constellation of symptoms called PTSD is culturally meaningful or is associated with significant disability and reduction in quality of life or even whether PTSD should take any priority in the provision of international aid and assistance. While these questions move beyond the primary findings of the paper they should be referenced given the extent of the debate in the literature on these questions.

What next?: Accept after minor essential revisions

Level of interest: An article of outstanding merit and interest in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:
None