A Qualitative Analysis of Posttraumatic Stress Among Mexican Victims of Disaster

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In unstructured interviews, 24 Mexicans described survivors’ responses to disasters in Guadalajara, Jalisco (n = 9), Homestead, Florida (n = 6), and Puerto Angel, Oaxaca (n = 9). This analysis assessed the extent to which symptom descriptions corresponded to the 17 criterion symptoms of PTSD. Nineteen participants (79%) mentioned from 1 to 9 criterion symptoms. Event-related distress, hypervigilance, recurrent recollections, and avoiding reminders were described most often. Only 3 criterion symptoms were never described. Twenty participants (83%) provided 109 separate expressions that could not be classified specifically as criterion symptoms. These phrases were sorted by 9 independent Mexican volunteers and cluster analyzed. Clusters composed of ataques de nervios, depression, lasting trauma, and somatic complaints provided the best description of the data.

KEY WORDS: PTSD; disaster; cross-cultural research; qualitative research.

Cross-cultural writings on the psychology of emotion emphasize both universalism and relativism (Ellsworth, 1994; Kleinman, 1988; Mesquita & Frijda, 1992). The experience of emotion is clearly universal, but cultures vary widely in the ways in which these basic emotions are expressed and displayed (Ekman, Friesen, & Ellsworth, 1972; Matsumoto, 1993, 1996). Whether or how culture influences the manifestation of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is not yet well-understood (Marsella, Friedman, Gerrity, & Scurfield, 1996). Although certainly not alone, Latin America is an important setting for research on this topic because historically it has experienced a number of catastrophic disasters, as well as much violence and political unrest. PTSD has been observed among Latinos following disasters.
in Mexico (De la Fuente, 1990; Norris, Perilla, Ibañez, & Murphy, 2001), Chile (Durkin, 1993), and Colombia (Lima, Pai, Santacruz, & Lozano, 1991), as well as in the United States (Perilla, Norris, & Lavizzo, in press). In a U.S. sample that included 138 immigrants from Mexico and 120 refugees from Central America, 25% of the Mexicans and 50% of the Central Americans showed a pattern of symptoms consistent with a diagnosis of PTSD (Cervantes, Salgado de Snyder, & Padilla, 1989). Recent epidemiologic data from Mexico likewise have revealed high prevalence rates of both trauma exposure (77%) and lifetime PTSD (DSM-IV; 13%; Norris, Murphy, Perilla, & Baker, 2000). These studies, however, have generally applied PTSD measures that were developed in the U.S. to Latin American populations. There are few data that address how well the PTSD diagnosis matches Latinos’ own constructions of trauma and its aftermath. In fact, on the basis of his research with Salvadoran refugees, Jenkins (1996) concluded that the diagnostic criteria for PTSD, especially Criterion C, may not be fully applicable to Latino victims of trauma.

To uncover emic or native constructions, it is generally recommended that qualitative methodologies be employed wherein participants describe their experiences and emotions in their own terms. In light of such recommendations, we aimed to contribute to an understanding of the meaning of trauma in Mexican culture by eliciting descriptions of emotions experienced following disasters in their communities. We adopted both etic (universalist) and emic (relativist) perspectives by first searching the data for symptoms that specifically corresponded to PTSD criteria (an etic approach) and by then exploring the remaining data for clusters that represented native constructions (an emic approach).

**Method**

**Sample**

Three sites were selected to provide heterogeneity in disaster experience. Nine participants (3 men, 6 women) resided in Guadalajara, a large city in the state of Jalisco, Mexico. In April 1992, a major thoroughfare in a working-class neighborhood in Guadalajara exploded after government-owned gasoline entered the sewer lines. Hundreds of people died in the explosion and many residents of the area were involved in the recovery of bodies. Numerous houses were damaged beyond repair. Although some victims rebuilt or repaired their former residences, many relocated, at government expense, to apartments in other sectors of the city. When we conducted the interviews in June 1997, 5 years after the event, evidence of the disaster was still pervasive. Several vacant lots housed crosses or more elaborate memorials to the dead. We recruited participants in Guadalajara in two ways. Some people were approached directly on the street in the area of the