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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE  
"A SOCIOLOGY OF SURVIVORS: POST-TRAUMATIC  
SHOCK SYNDROME"

Dennis L. Peck

It is estimated that between 500,000 and 1.5 million Vietnam veterans suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), the nature of which includes sociological and psychological manifestations. However, despite past research efforts, an adequate understanding of the social consequences of PTSD and its effect upon veterans and their families remains largely unexplored.

I first became interested in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder upon returning to The University of Alabama after serving as a Senior Analyst with the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development. During a subsequent visit to Washington D.C., I met with the Director of the Disabled American Veterans (D.A.V.) and soon learned that we shared a common concern about the magnitude of the PTSD problem. In my role as an academic, and as a former member of the United States military who served with a special forces unit in Laos, my approach to the issues surrounding the relationship between service in Southeast Asia and PTSD continues to be critical. That is to say, I am unwilling to accept without question the validity of the assertions made regarding the effect of PTSD on Vietnam veterans. This healthy cynicism is enhanced by the fact that, despite an array of research literature, a consensus does not exist among researchers regarding the pronounced effect of PTSD upon Vietnam veterans.

This view is not intended to suggest that PTSD is not real. Indeed, documentation of the syndrome in the American Psychological Association's DSM III (1980) and the more recent efforts to revise criteria during October, 1984 serve as testimony that the disorder is recognized as a problem experienced by victims of incest, rape and marital abuse. In this regard, then, the generic issue involving PTSD transcends the veterans of war and the civilian survivors of military conflict.

Post-traumatic stress disorder is a human problem as opposed to being a survivor problem. I also believe that important research questions and the social and legal issues emerging from current knowledge of PTSD cannot be adequately evaluated without input from social and behavioral scientists. The proposed thrust of this special issue of the Journal was intended to be a sociological analysis of PTSD and Vietnam War veterans. Another view expressed by members of the Editorial Board of the Journal was that PTSD should be evaluated within a broader context. Thus, in addition to the articles that focus on the relationship between PTSD and Vietnam veterans, this special issue of the Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare includes contributions on incest, suicide, and Holocaust survivors.

One of the great attractions of research lies in its capacity to explain important features of contemporary life. The articles in this special issue are consistent with this orientation and the contributors believe that a need exists to more fully explore the social and psychological dynamics of PTSD. Each contributor has a deep commitment to research and to the application of knowledge in the service to humanity. While selections in this issue are not intended as a definitive statement, each paper should sensitize the reader to the wide-ranging effects of stress which emerge in the aftermath of traumatic events.

The first article by Sangetta Singg provides an historical overview of the post-traumatic stress concept. In linking the historical perspectives of traumatic stress with contemporary research and clinically oriented efforts to evaluate and treat victims of stress, the author demonstrates that the concept has a long history in the annals of scientific inquiry. Dr. Singg concludes her review of the scientific perspectives on stress by suggesting a general method for dealing with the delayed symptoms known to be related to the post-traumatic stress syndrome.

The contributions that focus on Vietnam veterans are impressive. Each paper provides a different assessment of the effects of PTSD on Vietnam veterans,

although the findings do not appear to be consistent. First, the Flynn and Teguis paper offers an interesting albeit preliminary assessment of a California based treatment program. The Gusman program provides Vietnam veterans an opportunity to deal with their unresolved grief related to traumatic war experiences. Examples of the kind of unresolved grief dealt with by the Gusman program staff and a general overview of the treatment philosophy are presented. Rather than viewing victims as pathological misfits, mentally ill or "character-disordered," the Gusman approach, according to Drs. Flynn and Teguis, is oriented toward a specialized form of therapeutic assistance.

It is interesting that the Gusman orientation appears to be gaining in acceptance among both professionals and the lay community. Dr. Alexandra Teguis has recently agreed to work with employees of the MacDonalds fast-food establishment in California which, during the fall of 1984, was the scene of a massacre perpetrated by a lone gunman. Moreover, the American Psychological Association now appears ready to deal with PTSD as a normal response to abnormal life events.

John P. Wilson is well known among students of PTSD for the work he undertook several years ago. Wilson had the first PTSD research project funded by the D.A.V., and the results of this research have recently begun to appear in scholarly journals. Because of his expertise, Dr. Wilson currently serves as consultant to the Work Group to Revise DSM III.

The major thrust of the Wilson, Smith and Johnson contribution is that the loss of significant others and life-threatening events are sufficient predictors of post-traumatic stress. Comparing a group of Vietnam veterans living in Ohio with a national sample of Vietnam combat veterans and a group of non-veteran subjects, Wilson, et al., report that Vietnam veterans appear to be more depressed, experience more problems related to their primary social groups and are prone to experience serious physical problems.

The findings reported by Ritter generate some interesting questions about the relationship between combat exposure and PTSD. Few researchers would disagree with Ritter's suggestion that the relationship of interest cannot be adequately evaluated without the use of an acceptable theoretical framework. Moving beyond the challenge that such research should be developed, Dr. Ritter empirically demonstrates that combat exposure per se may be an inadequate predictor of PTSD. The policy implications of the research reported in this paper for public service providers would seem to be substantial.

Inger J. Sagatun's discussion of attribution models of self-blame, coping strategies of incest victims and the effectiveness of self-help treatment programs predicated on reducing victim stress is another example of the incursion by sociologists into community-based treatment program evaluation. In her paper Dr. Sagatun reports on the effectiveness of a Parents United therapy program which assists family members to cope with a situation which only recently has been recognized as a significant social problem.

Reporting survey data gleaned from male offenders, female incest victims and spouses participating in a volunteer program, Sagatun observes that post-traumatic stress encumbers victims of incest to a greater extent than is found for either the offenders or their spouses. This difference can be explained in part by internal and external attribution models and in part by societal reaction to the participants of incest. Peer group support and rejection are also reported to be significant factors for explaining how program participants deal with the shame and guilt related to incest in an attempt to reduce the effect of post-traumatic stress.

In the paper on post-traumatic stress and life-destructive behavior, the author illustrates that not all individuals who experience stress choose to cope with this condition by seeking assistance. One of the most studied social problems, suicide continues to be a matter of vexation among concerned students.

Written by the editor, this study examines the relationship between traumatic stress and suicidal behavior, using case study material obtained from a Medical Examiner's office.

The general finding that suicide committers view themselves as insignificant and experience bereavement and stress sufficient to induce a life-and-death crisis would appear to be consequential for entire communities. Suicidal behavior, it is argued, can be attributed in part to stress-related reactions to negative perceptions of self-worth and in part to the actor's inability to act upon social conditions and events causing traumatic stress. This paper concludes with the suggestion that creation of public policies which overarch individual and community needs may be an important means to deal with the suicide problem.

The papers on Holocaust survivors offer an important review of extant research literature, an assessment of the Freudian and neo-Freudian clinical approach to post-traumatic stress disorder, and an interpretation of the needs of Holocaust survivors based on informal interviews. Written by sociologists and psychologists, each contribution has a common orientation; that is, the authors believe that historical and recent efforts to assist survivors of the Holocaust suffer from an excessive focus on the pathological effects emerging from the experience.

Each paper stands on its own merit, albeit the reader will undoubtedly recognize that the authors share similar concerns. Perhaps it is noteworthy that interested analysts have only recently recognized the heuristic value in attempting to establish an empirical relationship between post-traumatic stress disorder and the Holocaust. However, the extensive body of research and clinical literature on survivors strongly suggest that this relationship may have already been established.

Benjamin J. Hodgkins and Richard L. Douglass' evaluation of the PTSD research involving Holocaust survivors demonstrates that the need exists to fill an important empirical vacuum. The authors argue that,

irrespective of the large body of Holocaust literature, little data exists that is useful for evaluating the long-term consequences of post-traumatic stress evolving from the World War II concentration camp experience. Most surprising, perhaps, is the fact that the successful cross-cultural adjustment of the majority of Holocaust survivors has been ignored.

The authors raise several conceptual and methodological questions regarding the nature of extant Holocaust research and the lack of systematic design procedures employed in these projects. The literature review provided in this paper and the authors' critical assessment of the Freudian and neo-Freudian conceptual framework employed in previous research highlights yet another concern. Drs. Hodgkins and Douglass build a strong case for the development and implementation of a sociological approach to these issues, but they argue that a unique research opportunity will soon be lost because of the age of Holocaust survivors. Their recent experience with the LeVine Institute on Aging, Jewish Home for Aged, undoubtedly has sensitized the authors to the fact that if new insights are to be developed, the effort to do so must occur in the near future. Perhaps Drs. Hodgkins and Douglass will be able to use these insights and contribute to the research in this area, thereby adding a new dimension to post-traumatic stress studies.

The position posed in the contribution on the effects of the Holocaust by Drs. Harel, Kahana and Kahana compliments the Hodgkins and Douglass paper. In addition to the discussion of the theoretical and methodological limitations of the Holocaust and stress research literature, Harel, Kahana and Kahana formulate an eclectic perspective based on interviews conducted during 1983.

The authors' contention, based on an interpretation of unreported data, underscores an important human need. Survivors, according to the authors, continue to engage in post-war adaptation, primarily because of their pathological label and the lack of community support for their individual and collective

needs. One such need is symbolic in nature, but it is nevertheless real to survivors. This collective need would also seem to address a more generic human need regarding a symbolic memorial commemorating the Holocaust as an example of man's inhumanity to man.

Finally, the authors challenge scholars and interested analysts to explore the effect of environmental challenges and demands confronted by survivors in their efforts to adapt to new cultural and social environs. It logically follows, then, that a new theoretical orientation is necessary in order to develop a thorough and perhaps more appropriate assessment of the adaptation mechanisms employed to cope with post-traumatic stress.

At some point it seems insufficient to merely evaluate the analytical efforts of others without contributing to cumulative knowledge. In the brief paper subtitled "The Need for Conceptual Reassessment and Development," Dr. Jerome Rosenberg draws upon personal discussions with survivors and seven years of teaching and evaluation of the Holocaust literature to propose an alternative conceptual framework to existing clinical models. Although Rosenberg is concerned specifically with Holocaust survivors, the conceptualization presented in this paper skews toward more generic issues enshrouded in the post-traumatic stress syndrome.

The foundation for Rosenberg's current effort to develop a dehumanization scale can be identified in the work of Boder published 30-35 years ago, and more recent efforts of a select group of analysts who view survival from a non-pathological perspective. Reasons for why the pathological orientation has dominated the Holocaust literature for almost four decades are cited, and the author suggests that the continuous effort to focus upon the abnormal is detrimental to the creation of new knowledge and the application of alternative treatment modalities.

In the final paper Dr. Marlene Sway partially examines adaptive efforts of female survivors of the Holocaust. Based on interviews conducted with sixteen



middle-age and elderly women, Sway identifies three major factors that served to assist Jewish survivors in the adaptation process and to reestablish their sense of social worth, identity and self-esteem.

Grounded in the Weberian notion of the work ethic, this paper suggests that survivors who chose to resettle in the United States may have avoided another long-term traumatic event in part by embracing hard work as their means to survival. Similar to the other contributions on the Holocaust, the author concludes by suggesting that previous analysts and helping professionals may have prejudged the majority of survivors, thereby unwittingly contributed to their difficulty in coping with the stressors related to both the war experience and the post-war adaptation process.

The Journal was established on a principle of excellence and the recognition that the results of research should contribute to the community by assisting professionals and practitioners who strive to solve individual and organizational problems. This special issue, we hope, is consistent with this orientation in that the information will be useful to both researchers and practitioners.

A number of individuals have contributed through their time and effort to make this special issue possible. The entire issue is better because of their considerable assistance. Several individuals served as reviewers of the contributed papers at various stages of their development. The expertise of Gerald Globetti, Gary DeMack, Ron Jones, Sandra Lavenger, Lucinda Roff, Jerome Rosenberg, Irene Rubin, Herbert J. Rubin, and Marlene Sway was invaluable to me as editor of this issue of the Journal. Special recognition for their effort to prepare the manuscripts in a form acceptable for publication is due Linda Crowson and Sandra Lavender. Finally, I wish to acknowledge the encouragement and advice received from Robert D. Leighninger, Jr., Edward J. Pawlak and Danny H. Thompson. I had contact with each of these individuals during some phase of the project; each was generous with his support on behalf of this initiative.