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POSTTRAUMATIC-STRESS DURING LATER LIFE: A CROSS-SECTIONAL AND LONGITUDINAL INVESTIGATION

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology at Massey University

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To Nana and Pop,
who provided the inspiration for this project,
and who proudly encouraged me during the initial stages,
but passed away before its completion.
ABSTRACT

Older people may not only fall victim to traumatic events, but will inevitably encounter a host of late-life stressors that threaten psychological and physical well-being. In addition to current distressing occurrences, many older people will have past unresolved traumatic memories that have the capacity to generate trauma-related symptoms and impinge on present-day functioning.

Much of the existing literature and research on late-life traumatisation concerns the impact of prior war- or Holocaust-experiences. Empirical investigations into the traumatizing effects of lifetime trauma exposure and late-life stressors within community-based samples of older people are scarce.

The present study explored the manifestation of trauma-related symptoms in a sample of New Zealand's older (60+ years) citizens. The goal was to discover the extent that lifetime trauma, recent trauma and recent stressors impact on posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), trauma-related perceptions and physical health during later life. Additionally, a new theoretical framework of traumatisation, Trauma-Schema Theory, was introduced and given some preliminary testing. Trauma-Schema Theory maintains that trauma-schemata, cognitive-emotional frameworks that guide information processing, are responsible for traumatic-stress by eliciting beliefs and perceptions that confirm an overwhelming sense of threat, vulnerability and powerlessness. This theory provides viable explanations for occurrences specific to later life, including delayed PTSD reactions in older people, and the triggering of PTSD symptoms in response to late-life stressors.

The present study used a cross-sectional/longitudinal design with two data collection points, each one year apart. Questionnaires measuring PTSD, anxiety, depression, dissociation, self-rated physical health, control beliefs, posttraumatic vulnerability perceptions, trauma history and past-year stressors were mailed out to 2000 older adults who had responded to community based advertising. Of these 1489 adults returned questionnaire one (Q1). One year later consenting participants were sent questionnaire two (Q2), which was similar, but contained a measure of past-year trauma exposure in
place of lifetime trauma exposure. Altogether, 1050 respondents returned Q2. Mean ages for Time 1 and Time 2 were 72.1 years and 71.7 years, respectively. Each sample consisted of around one-third males and two-third females and most were of New Zealand European descent.

Lifetime trauma exposure and past-year stressors were reported at high rates among the samples. Nearly half of the longitudinal sample also reported at least one past-year traumatic event. Of the psychological measures, PTSD was most strongly associated with lifetime trauma, lifetime abuse, multiple lifetime trauma, past-year abuse and past-year multiple trauma. Depression was most strongly associated with past-year trauma. Due to the limited scope of the study, PTSD was the only symptom type further assessed in relation to the other variables.

A series of hierarchical multiple regressions were performed and a number of mediational models were tested. Cross-sectional data analyses showed that both lifetime trauma and lifetime abuse predicted PTSD symptoms. Distress from late-life stressors mediated the trauma-PTSD associations. Longitudinal data analyses indicated that late-life stressors establish the pathway from recent trauma to PTSD escalation over one year. Posttraumatic vulnerability perceptions and control beliefs mediated a large proportion of all associations between event variables (i.e., lifetime trauma, lifetime abuse, recent trauma, recent stressors) and PTSD, providing preliminary verification of Trauma-Schema Theory. Additional analyses also indicated that PTSD, not trauma per se, is responsible for late-life physical health decline.

Limitations of the study and practical implications of the findings are reported. An emphasis on the importance of future research is portrayed, and ideas for future empirical work on traumatic-stress in New Zealand's older population are provided. Finally, practical implications of the findings are reported with the hope that older traumatised adults will, one day, receive the appropriate clinical care necessary to enhance the quality of their lives.
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I am extremely grateful to all of the adults who participated in this research. I was overwhelmed by the large number of questionnaires that were returned at both phases of the study, which conveyed that participants had a high level of dedication to the project.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication........................................................................................................... i
Abstract............................................................................................................... iii
Acknowledgements............................................................................................ v
Table of Contents............................................................................................... vii
List of Tables and Figures.................................................................................. xvi
Preface................................................................................................................. xxi

## Chapter One

**TRAUMA AND OLDER PEOPLE**................................................................. 1

1.1 Life-Events and Older People................................................................. 2
1.2 Defining Trauma....................................................................................... 3
1.3 Posttraumatic Stress During Later-Life................................................... 7
1.3.1 Late-Life Reactions to Trauma............................................................... 7
1.3.2 Posttraumatic Stress and Late-Life Stressors....................................... 12
1.4 Chapter Summary..................................................................................... 15

## Chapter Two

**PSYCHOLOGICAL RESPONSES TO TRAUMA**........................................... 17

2.1 Acute Responses to Trauma................................................................. 18
2.2 Chronic Responses to Trauma............................................................... 20
2.3 Prevalence of PTSD Among the Aged.................................................... 22
2.4 Other Trauma-Related Symptoms During Later-Life............................. 25
2.4.1 Depression........................................................................................... 25
2.4.2 Dissociation.......................................................................................... 26
2.4.3 Anxiety.................................................................................................. 27
2.5 Chapter summary..................................................................................... 28
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Chapter Three**

THE PHYSICAL IMPACT OF TRAUMA ............................................................. 30

- Chapter Preview .................................................................................. 30

- 3.1 Defining Physical Health ......................................................... 30

- 3.2 Traumatic Exposure and Physical Health in Aging Populations ....... 31

- 3.2.1 Long-term Physical Health Consequences of Trauma ................. 31

- 3.2.2 Immediate Physical Health Consequences of Trauma ................. 33

- 3.3 PTSD and Physical Health ....................................................... 34

- 3.3.1 How PTSD Affects Physical Health ......................................... 35

- 3.4 Chapter Summary ....................................................................... 36

**Chapter Four**

THEORETICAL BASIS OF TRAUMATIC-STRESS ...................................... 37

- Chapter Preview ................................................................................ 37

- 4.1 Theories of PTSD ..................................................................... 38

- 4.1.1 Behavioural Theories of PTSD .................................................. 38

- 4.1.2 Cognitive Theories of PTSD ..................................................... 38

- 4.1.3 Emotional Processing Theories of PTSD ................................... 42

- 4.1.4 Social-Cognitive Perspectives of PTSD ..................................... 43

- 4.2 Trauma-Schema Theory ............................................................ 44

- 4.2.1 Trauma-Schema Theory and PTSD .......................................... 44

- 4.2.2 Risk factors for PTSD and Trauma Schemata ......................... 47

- 4.2.3 Trauma-Schema Theory and Aging .......................................... 49

- 4.3 Objectives of the Present Study .................................................. 52

- 4.4 Chapter Summary ..................................................................... 54
### Chapter Five

**METHOD**

- Chapter Preview: 55
- 5.1 Research Design: 55
- 5.2 Pilot Study: 56
- 5.3 Participants: 57
- 5.4 Questionnaires: 57
- 5.4.1 Measurement of Traumatic and Stressful Events: 59
- 5.4.2 Measurement of Psychological Symptoms: 63
- 5.4.3 Measurement of Physical Health: 68
- 5.4.4 Measurement of Trauma-Related Beliefs and Perceptions: 69
- 5.5 Procedure: 71
- 5.5.1 Time 1 Data Collection Procedure: 71
- 5.5.2 Time 2 Data Collection Procedure: 72
- 5.6 Ethical Considerations: 72
- 5.7 Chapter Summary: 73

### Chapter Six

**RESULTS: PART 1**

- Chapter Preview: 75
- 6.1 Data Screening and Analysis: 75
- 6.2 Study Measures and Research Variables: 79
- 6.2.1 Traumatic and Stressful Events: 79
- 6.2.2 Psychological Symptoms: 80
- 6.2.3 Physical Health: 80
- 6.2.4 Trauma-Related Beliefs: 80
- 6.3 Demographic composition of T1 and T2 samples: 81
- 6.4 Results of PCL-C, Health, SPTVS and PMS measures: 82
- 6.4.1 PTSD Checklist Civilian (PCL - C): 83
- 6.4.2 Self-Evaluation of Health Rating Scale: 84
- 6.4.3 Schillace Post-Traumatic Vulnerability Scale (SPTVS): 85
- 6.4.4 Pearlin's Mastery Scale (PMS): 86
**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

6.4.5 Summary of Results for Measures ................................................. 86
6.5 Correlates of PTSD ........................................................................... 87
   6.5.1 PTSD and Trauma ................................................................. 87
   6.5.2 PTSD and Recent Stressors ....................................................... 88
   6.5.3 PTSD and Post-traumatic Vulnerability Perceptions .................. 89
   6.5.4 PTSD and Control Beliefs .......................................................... 90
   6.5.5 PTSD and Physical Health ......................................................... 90
6.6 Chapter Summary .............................................................................. 90

**Chapter Seven**

**RESULTS: PART TWO ........................................................................ 94**

Chapter Preview ....................................................................................... 94
7.1 Life-Time Exposure ........................................................................... 94
   7.1.1 Frequency of Lifetime Trauma Exposure ................................. 94
   7.1.2 Socio-Demographic Differences in Exposure to Specific Traumas.. 96
   7.1.3 Exposure to Lifetime Multiple Trauma ...................................... 97
   7.1.4 Lifetime Exposure to Abuse ..................................................... 98
   7.1.5 Worst Lifetime Trauma ............................................................. 99
   7.1.6 Age of Trauma Exposure ......................................................... 99
7.2 Exposure to Past Year Trauma .......................................................... 99
   7.2.1 Past-year Exposure for the Longitudinal Sample ...................... 99
   7.2.2 Socio-Demographic Differences in Frequency of Past-Year Trauma...... 100
   7.2.3 Exposure to Past-Year Multiple Trauma .................................... 100
   7.2.4 Exposure to Past-Year Abuse ................................................. 100
   7.2.5 Specific Past-Year Traumas ...................................................... 101
   7.2.6 Socio-Demographic Differences in Specific Trauma Exposure ............ 102
   7.2.7 Worst Past-Year Trauma ............................................................. 102
7.3 Exposure to Recent Stressors ............................................................... 102
   7.3.1 Frequency of Recent Stressors .................................................. 102
   7.3.2 Socio-Demographic Differences in Frequency of Recent Stressors ........ 103
   7.3.3 Distress from Stressors .............................................................. 103
TABLE OF CONTENTS

7.3.4 Exposure to Specific Stressors ................................................................. 104
7.3.5 Socio-Demographic Differences for Exposure to Specific Stressors .......... 105
7.4 Chapter Summary ...................................................................................... 107

Chapter Eight

RESULTS: PART THREE ..................................................................................... 109

8.1 Identification of Trauma-Related Symptoms ............................................... 110
8.1.1 Principal Components Analysis (PCA) ..................................................... 110
8.1.2 Correlations Between Symptom Variables and Trauma .............................. 111
8.1.3 Conclusions Relating to the PCA Results ............................................... 113
8.2 PTSD as a Clinical Disorder ........................................................................ 114
8.2.1 PTSD Diagnosis at T1 ........................................................................... 114
8.2.2 PTSD Diagnosis at T2 ........................................................................... 115
8.2.3 Specific PTSD Symptoms in Diagnostic Groups ....................................... 116
8.2.4 Symptom Identifiers for PTSD ............................................................... 118
8.2.5 Section Summary ................................................................................... 118
8.3 Temporal Changes in PTSD Diagnostic Status ............................................ 119
8.3.1 T1 DIAG, T2 DIAG .............................................................................. 119
8.3.2 T1 NO DIAG, T2 DIAG ......................................................................... 120
8.3.3 T1 DIAG, T2 NO DIAG ......................................................................... 120
8.3.4 T1 NO DIAG, T2 NO DIAG ................................................................... 120
8.3.5 Summary of PTSD Results .................................................................... 121
8.4 Predictor Variables for Meeting PTSD Criteria ............................................ 121
8.4.1 Logistic Regression of PTSD Diagnosis .................................................. 121
8.4.2 Gaining a PTSD Diagnosis from T1 to T2 .............................................. 123
8.4.3 Section Summary ................................................................................... 124
8.5 Past-year Events and Probability of PTSD ................................................ 124
8.5.1 Difference Across Recent Traumas in Probability of PTSD .................... 124
8.5.2 Difference Across Recent Stressors in Probability of PTSD .................... 126
8.6 Chapter Summary ...................................................................................... 127
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Chapter Nine**

**RESULTS: PART FOUR**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Preview</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.1 Data Preparation and Prediction Testing</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.1.1 Assumption Testing</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.1.2 Case-to-IV Ratio</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.1.3 Dependent and Independent Variables</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.1.4 Control Variables</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.1.5 Hypothesis Testing</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.2 Cross-Sectional Data Analysis: MR of PTSD T1 Scores</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.2.1 MR of PTSD T1 Scores on Lifetime Trauma, Recent Stressors and Trauma-Related Beliefs</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.2.2 MR of PTSD T1 Scores on Trauma During Life-Stages, Multiple Trauma and Lifetime Abuse</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.2.3 Summary of Findings for Cross-Sectional Data</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.3 Longitudinal Data Analysis: MR of PTSD T2 Scores</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.3.1 MR of PTSD T2 Scores on Recent Trauma, Recent Stressors and Trauma-Related Beliefs</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.3.2 Summary of Findings in Relation to Longitudinal Data</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.4 Cross-Sectional Data Analysis: MR of SRHLTH T1 Scores</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.4.1 MR of SRHLTH T1 Scores on LIFE:TRMA and PTSD T1</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.4.2 Summary of Findings in Relation to Cross-Sectional Data</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.5 Longitudinal Data Analysis: MR on SRHLTH T2 Scores</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.5.1 MR of SRHLTH T2 Scores on REC:TRMA T2 and PTSD T2</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.5.2 Summary of Findings in Relation to Cross-Sectional Data</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.6 Chapter Overview</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Chapter Ten**

**DISCUSSION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Preview</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.1 Exposure to Lifetime and Recent Traumatic Events</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.1.1 Lifetime Trauma</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.1.2</td>
<td>Recent Trauma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>Exposure to Recent Stressors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.2.1</td>
<td>Recent Stressors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>PTSD in Older People</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.3.1</td>
<td>Posttraumatic-Stress During Later Life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.3.2</td>
<td>Prevalence of PTSD in NZ's Older Population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.3.3</td>
<td>The Presentation of PTSD During Later Life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.3.4</td>
<td>Section Summary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>Predictors of PTSD During Later-Life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.4.1</td>
<td>General Predictors of PTSD During Later-Life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.4.2</td>
<td>Specific Past-Year Events and PTSD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.4.3</td>
<td>Section Summary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>Trauma-Schema Theory: Cross-Sectional Data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.5.1</td>
<td>Lifetime Trauma and PTSD Outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.5.2</td>
<td>Recent Stressors and PTSD Outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.5.3</td>
<td>Trauma-Related Beliefs and PTSD Outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>Trauma-Schema Theory: Longitudinal Data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.6.1</td>
<td>Previous PTSD Scores and Current PTSD Outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.6.2</td>
<td>Recent Trauma and PTSD Outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.6.3</td>
<td>Recent Stressors and PTSD Outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.6.4</td>
<td>Trauma-Schemata and PTSD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>The Impact of Trauma on Physical Health: Cross-Sectional Data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.7.1</td>
<td>Lifetime Trauma and Physical Health Outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.7.2</td>
<td>PTSD and Physical Health Outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>The Impact of Recent Trauma on Physical Health: Longitudinal Data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.8.1</td>
<td>Previous and Present Physical Health Ratings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.8.2</td>
<td>Recent Trauma and Physical Health Outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.8.3</td>
<td>PTSD and Physical Health Outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.8.4</td>
<td>Summary of Physical Health Outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>Issues Related to the Study: Measurement, Generalisation and Internal Validity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.9.1</td>
<td>The Measurement of Traumatic and Stressful Events</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### TABLE OF CONTENTS

10.9.2 The Measurement of Traumatic-Stress ................................................. 182
10.9.3 The Measurement of Trauma-Schemata .............................................. 184
10.9.4 The Measurement of Physical Health .................................................. 185
10.9.5 Generalizability .................................................................................. 186
10.9.6 Internal Validity .................................................................................. 188
10.9.7 Issues Related to Statistical Analysis .................................................... 190
10.10 Ideas for Future Research ..................................................................... 191
10.10.1 Common Late-Life Traumatic Events ............................................... 191
10.10.2 Gender Differences and Late-Life PTSD .......................................... 191
10.10.3 The Manifestation of Traumatisation During Later Life ..................... 192
10.10.4 Advancing Trauma-Schema Theory ................................................... 192
10.10.5 The Progression of PTSD During the Aging Process .......................... 194
10.10.6 Physical Health and Trauma .............................................................. 195
10.10.7 Improved Statistical Procedures ......................................................... 195
10.11 Practical Implications for the Assessment and Treatment of Older Adults
From the Study Outcomes ........................................................................... 196
10.11.1 Clinical Assessment .......................................................................... 196
10.11.2 The Practical and Therapeutic Treatment of Older Adults .................. 197
10.11.3 Summary of Practical Implications of the Present Findings .............. 200
10.12 Conclusion ............................................................................................ 201

REFERENCES ............................................................................................... 203
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appendix A-1: Information Sheet, T1</th>
<th>237</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A-2: Questionnaire One</td>
<td>243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A-3: Request for Summary of Results/Consent Form for Future Participation, T1</td>
<td>271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A-4: List of Services</td>
<td>275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B-1: Cover Letter for T2</td>
<td>279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B-2: Information Sheet, T2</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B-3: Questionnaire Two</td>
<td>287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B-4: Request for Summary of Results/Consent Form for Future Participation, T2</td>
<td>317</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C: Advertisement Used to Recruit Participants</td>
<td>321</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix D-1: Procedure for principal components analysis (PCA)</td>
<td>325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix D-2: Rotated loadings with varimax solution of 5-component PCA</td>
<td>331</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

TABLES

Table 1: Diagnostic criteria for PTSD: DSM-IV (APA, 1994) ......................................................... 5

Table 2: Study measures and research variables for T1 and T2 .......................................................... 79

Table 3: Demographic profiles for samples at T1 (N = 1489) and T2 (N = 1050) .......................... 81

Table 4: Study measures summary: Results of trauma, recent stressor, PTSD, physical health, vulnerability perceptions and control beliefs for the cross-sectional sample (N = 1489) and the longitudinal sample (N = 1050) ................. 82

Table 5: Pearson $r$ values between PTSD T1/T2 and all lifetime trauma variables, recent trauma variables and recent stressor variables ................................................................. 88

Table 6: Pearson $r$ values between PTSD T1/T2 and VULN T1/T2, CNTRL T1/T2 and SRHLTH T1/T2 ...................................................................................................................... 89

Table 7: Exposure to specific traumatic events over the life-time and at 60+ years (N = 1489) ......................................................................................................................................... 95

Table 8: Gender differences for exposure to specific lifetime traumatic events .......................... 96

Table 9: Relationship differences for exposure to specific lifetime traumatic events ................................. 97

Table 10: Mean, standard deviation and range for REC.TRMA T2, REC.MTRMA T2 and REC.ABUSE T2 (N = 1050) .................................................................................................................. 99

Table 11: Past-year traumas reported by the longitudinal sample at T2 (N =1050) ......................... 101
LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 12: Frequency of recent stressors reported at T1 and T2 (N = 1369)..............103

Table 13: Frequency of exposure to specific recent stressors measured at T1 and T2.................................................................104

Table 14: Significant gender differences for individual T1 recent stressors (chi-square) (N = 1487)..................................................................................................................105

Table 15: Pearson r values between LIFE.TRMA, LIFE.MTRMA & LIFE.ABUSE and symptom variables (both original and PCA variables)..................................112

Table 16: Pearson r values between REC.TRMA T2, REC.MTRMA T2 & REC.ABUSE T2 and symptom variables (both original and PCA variables).................................................................................113

Table 17: Frequency of PTSD symptoms present in PTSD.DIAG T1/T2 groups........117

Table 18: Logistic regression analysis of DIAG T2 as a function of socio-demographics, LIFE.TRMA, REC.TRMA T2, REC.STRESSR T1, REC.STRESSR T2, VULN T1, VULN T2, CNTRL T1 and CNTRL T2 (N = 602)..................................................................................................................123

Table 19: The proportion of participants at T2 who reported each recent trauma (P1), the proportion in the PTSD.DIAG T2 group who reported each recent trauma (P2), and the proportion of people in P1 also in the PTSD.DIAG T2 group (P3)..................................................................................................................125

Table 20: The proportion of participants at T2 who reported each recent stressor (P1), the proportion in the PTSD.DIAG T2 group who reported each recent stressor (P2), and the proportion of people in P1 also in the PTSD.DIAG T2 group (P3)..................................................................................................................126
LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 21: Hierarchical multiple regression of PTSD T1 scores on demographic, LIFE.TRMA, REC.STRSSR T1, VULN T1 & CNTRL T1, showing standardized regression coefficients (Beta), multiple R, R², adjusted R², R² change, and step 4 squared semi-partial correlations (sr²) (N = 1291) .......... 135

Table 22: Testing mediator effects of DISTRSS T1 on the relationship between LIFE.TRMA and PTSD T1 .......................................................... 136

Table 23: Testing mediator effects of VULN T1 and CNTRL T1 on the relationship between LIFE.TRMA and PTSD T1 ........................................ 137

Table 24: Testing mediator effects of VULN T1 and CNTRL T1 on the relationship between REC.STRSSR T1 and PTSD T1 ................................................. 139

Table 25: Regression of PTSD T1 scores on TRMACHILD, TRMAADOL, TRMAYNG, TRMAMIDD, TRMAOLD, LIFE.MTRMA, LIFE.ABUSE, REC.STRSSR T1, VULN T1 & CNTRL T1 on PTSD T1 showing standardized regression coefficients (Beta), multiple R, R², adjusted R², R² change, and step 3 squared semi-partial correlations (sr²) (N = 287) .......... 141

Table 26: Testing mediator effects of DISTRSS on the relationship between LIFE.ABUSE T1 and PTSD T1 .......................................................... 142

Table 27: Hierarchical multiple regression of PTSD T2 scores on demographics, PTSD T1, REC.TRMA T2, REC.STRSSR T2, VULN T2 & CNTRL T2 showing standardized regression coefficients (Beta), multiple R, R², adjusted R², R² change, and step 4 squared semi-partial correlations (sr²) (N = 350) .......... 145

Table 28: Testing mediator effects of DISTRSS T2 on the relationship between REC.TRMA T2 and PTSD T2 .......................................................... 146

Table 29: Testing mediator effects of VULN T2 and CNTRL T2 on the relationship between REC.STRSSR T2 and PTSD T2 ........................................ 147
### LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

**Table 30:** Hierarchical multiple regression of SRHLTH T1 scores on LIFE.TRMA and PTSD T1, showing standardized regression coefficients (Beta), multiple R, R², adjusted R², R² change, and step 3 squared semi-partial correlations (sr²) (N = 1381).................................................................................................................................................................................................150

**Table 31:** Testing mediator effects of PTSD T1 on the relationship between LIFE.TRMA and SRHLTH T1..............................................................................................................................................................................................................................................152

**Table 32:** Hierarchical multiple regression of SRHLTH T2 scores on REC.TRMA T2 and PTSD T2, showing standardized regression coefficients (Beta), multiple R, R², adjusted R², R² change, and step 3 squared semi-partial correlations (sr²) (N = 380).................................................................................................................................................................................................153

**Table 33:** Transformation of the symptom measures scales for the principal components analysis........................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................327

**Table 34:** Initial eigenvalues from the principal components analysis of psychological symptom measures........................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................328

**Table 35:** Comparison of eigenvalues from the principal components analysis and the corresponding criterion values from parallel analysis........................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................329

### FIGURES

**Figure 1:** Life-time exposure to trauma (N = 1489).................................................................................................................................94

**Figure 2:** Diagram of a mediation model.................................................................................................................................................................................................132
"The older recipient is not simply the passive recipient of events and changes. The individual is an actor in his or her own life, coping and managing"
(Hyer & Sohnle, 2001, p. 3)

Like many other countries in the western world, New Zealand's population is aging, and older people represent a growing number and percentage in society. By the year 2041 New Zealand's aging population is projected to rise by over 50%, from around half a million currently, to well over one million1 (Statistics New Zealand, 2007). An increased older population comes with a number of consequences, including an escalating demand for health-care services.

A sizeable proportion of health problems in older adults utilizing health-care services will stem from traumatic stress. However, the majority of these symptoms will not be identified as having a trauma-related etiological basis. This is because physical- and mental-health professionals are limited in their knowledge about the extent and nature of trauma-related problems during later life. Although the psychological literature is brimming with information about the physical and psychological effects of trauma, research regarding the manifestation of trauma-related problems in older people is scarce.

Why older adults have been overlooked as the focus of traumatic-stress research is unknown. An acquaintance once insinuated that I was wasting my time studying older adults, since this group are living the last phase of their lives. Perhaps this perspective is shared by others who have disregarded older adults in research ventures on traumatic-stress. However, all people, regardless of age, have the right to an improved quality of life. Older adults deserve to be provided with help to assist with the alleviation of psychological distress. This includes being offered appropriate assessment and therapeutic care that cater to their unique developmental needs. Because psychosomatic symptoms increase and physiological functions take longer to return to baseline as aging

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1 This projected figure is assuming low fertility, high mortality and long-run annual net migration of 5000 and is, therefore, conservative.
occurs (Hyer & Sohnle, 2001), it seems even more urgent that research efforts focus on understanding late-life traumatic stress, so that physical deterioration and increased health-care utilization by an increasing older population, can be prevented.

With this in mind, the present research was designed to enhance understanding of trauma-related problems during later life, with the ultimate goal of informing those who provide health-services to older adults. A cross-sectional/longitudinal study was designed. In putting together the questionnaire, a large number of inventories were utilized. Although I was aware that all data collected from the questionnaire could not be sufficiently evaluated within the limited scope of the present thesis, the opportunity to gather important longitudinal information on a large scale was embraced with future goals in mind. These included further statistical analyses of any unprocessed data, in addition to the continuation of longitudinal research on the psychological and physical well-being of the same sample for many years into the future. The extensive documentation of trauma-history, recent traumatic events and psychological symptoms also create an opportunity for detailed longitudinal analyses on subgroups of respondents (e.g., abuse victims; respondents currently meeting PTSD criteria; ethnic minorities) who have already given consent to be contacted in the future.

As detailed within the body of the thesis, choosing which variables to exclude from the project was based on the statistical assessment of symptom variables and their relationships with all lifetime and recent trauma variables. In the end PTSD symptomatology was kept to represent traumatic-stress in older people because PTSD had the strongest correlations with all but one of the trauma variables. Depression, dissociation and anxiety were eliminated from all subsequent analyses.

Finally, all test statistics presented in this thesis were rounded to two decimal places. Mean age and mean frequency of traumatic and stressful events were rounded to one decimal place, which was one extra place more than the original data. Percentages were rounded to one decimal place in the Results and to the nearest whole percent within the literature review and the Discussion as deemed appropriate by APA (1994).