

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

**How do social support and optimism moderate the relationship between
traumatic exposure and PTSD symptoms?**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
in Psychology at Massey University, Albany, New Zealand.

Barbara E. Wojciewska

2015

Declaration

I declare that this thesis represents my own work, except where due acknowledgement is made, and that it has been previously included in a thesis, dissertation or report submitted to this University or to any other institution for a degree, diploma or other qualification.

.....

Barbara E. Wojcierska

Promise me you'll always remember: You're braver than you believe, and stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think.

A. A. Milne



Illustration by Beata Wojciewska, 2015.

Abstract

The aim of this research was to look at how individuals within the Auckland region of New Zealand were affected by traumatic events in their lives. The current study's aims included looking at the relationship between trauma exposure and PTSD symptoms within individuals that had experienced traumatic events in the Auckland region of New Zealand. The current project also aimed to investigate whether optimism and social support had a moderating effect on the PTSD symptoms of Auckland residents who had experienced trauma. A cross-sectional, self-report survey design was used to collect data. This design was selected due to the time constraints of the project and considerations of how data would be collected. The self-report questionnaire was the only method of data collection for our constructs of PTSD, traumatic events, optimism and social support. Participants voluntarily completed the questionnaire online. One hundred and fifty participants attempted the questionnaire. One hundred and eight participants provided complete data. Statistical analysis was conducted to establish the relationship between trauma exposure, within 12 months and lifetime, and PTSD symptom prevalence within a general Auckland, New Zealand population. In addition, moderation analyses were conducted on the relationship between PTSD symptoms and trauma exposure. Results established a statistically significant relationship between trauma exposure within the last 12 months and PTSD symptoms. No moderation effects were found for social support and optimism in the present study for a general Auckland, New Zealand population. This research contributes to existing general population research regarding trauma exposure and also looks at optimism and social support in general populations.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr Ian de Terte, for your support in this journey and advice on what to do next when things didn't go to plan. Believe me, there were many hurdles along the way! I would also like to thank all the participants that were involved in this study. Without your help, this project would not have been possible.

This has been one of the most challenging accomplishments in my life to date. There were many personal struggles that interrupted the academic side of my life but somehow perseverance and determination helped get me to the finish line.

To my parents, Marek and Beata, I am grateful for all the sacrifices you make for me on a daily basis. I am very lucky to have parents who have travelled half way across the world in order to provide me with a better future. Your ability to take life as it comes has inspired me to face challenges head on and to not give up. We have been through our struggles, but it has made us stronger and we will always have each other no matter which part of the world we end up in. Love you.

To my grandmother, Ewa, thank you for always being proud of me, even when I didn't think my achievements were significant. Miss you.

To my friends, thank you for showing understanding. I know I have been difficult at times but your kind words have been the fuel that has kept my motivation and spirits up. The letters, emails, skype calls, library sessions, beach walks, movie nights, gigs, cups of tea and food fests – all have reminded me how important friendship is in the grand scheme of life. Laughter truly is the best medicine. Coffee helps also.

Thank you.

| | |
|--|-----|
| Declaration | i |
| Abstract | iii |
| Acknowledgments | iv |
| Table of contents | v |
| List of figures and tables | ix |
| Chapter One: Introduction | 1 |
| Background of study..... | 1 |
| Purpose of the study..... | 3 |
| Significance of the study..... | 4 |
| Research hypotheses..... | 5 |
| <i>Hypotheses</i> | 5 |
| Organisation of the study..... | 6 |
| Chapter Two: Traumatic Stress | 8 |
| What is a traumatic event?..... | 8 |
| Ideas surrounding trauma..... | 9 |
| Posttraumatic Stress Disorder..... | 10 |
| <i>PTSD vulnerability and predictors</i> | 11 |
| Experiencing trauma..... | 17 |
| Stress versus traumatisation..... | 21 |
| Traumatic events..... | 22 |
| <i>Natural disasters</i> | 22 |
| <i>Human-made disasters</i> | 24 |
| <i>War and combat</i> | 25 |

| | |
|---|----|
| <i>Single-event trauma</i> | 28 |
| Trauma doesn't have to mean psychopathology..... | 29 |
| Chapter Three: Social Support | 34 |
| Ideas surrounding social support..... | 34 |
| Main effects and buffering effects..... | 35 |
| Different types of social support..... | 37 |
| Social support and stressors..... | 38 |
| PTSD and social support..... | 40 |
| Optimism and social support..... | 42 |
| Benefits of social support..... | 43 |
| Chapter Four: Optimism | 45 |
| Ideas surrounding optimism..... | 45 |
| Optimism and social support..... | 47 |
| Optimism and stressors..... | 49 |
| Benefits of optimism..... | 50 |
| PTSD, optimism and posttraumatic growth..... | 52 |
| Is optimism related to positive life events?..... | 53 |
| Chapter Five: Research aims and hypotheses | 54 |
| Research Aims..... | 54 |
| Research questions and hypotheses..... | 54 |
| <i>Hypothesis 1</i> | 55 |
| <i>Hypothesis 2</i> | 55 |
| <i>Hypothesis 3</i> | 55 |

| | |
|--|-----------|
| <i>Hypothesis 4</i> | 56 |
| <i>Hypothesis 5</i> | 56 |
| <i>Hypothesis 6</i> | 56 |
| Chapter Six: Method | 57 |
| Research design..... | 57 |
| Recruitment methods..... | 58 |
| Participants and setting..... | 58 |
| Sample..... | 59 |
| Outliers..... | 62 |
| Questionnaire..... | 63 |
| <i>Traumatic events</i> | 64 |
| <i>PTSD symptoms</i> | 65 |
| <i>Social support</i> | 67 |
| <i>Optimism</i> | 68 |
| Method considerations..... | 69 |
| Ethical considerations..... | 69 |
| Statistical analysis..... | 70 |
| <i>Descriptive statistics</i> | 70 |
| <i>Cronbach's alpha</i> | 71 |
| <i>Correlation, hierarchical multiple regression and moderation analysis</i> | 71 |
| Chapter Seven: Results | 73 |
| Data screening..... | 73 |
| Descriptive statistics..... | 73 |

| | |
|---------------------------------------|------------|
| Normality of data..... | 78 |
| Research hypotheses..... | 79 |
| Hypothesis 1..... | 80 |
| Hypothesis 2..... | 81 |
| Moderation analysis..... | 83 |
| Hypothesis 3..... | 83 |
| Hypothesis 4..... | 86 |
| Hypothesis 5..... | 88 |
| Hypothesis 6..... | 90 |
| Post hoc power analysis..... | 92 |
| Summary of results..... | 93 |
| Chapter Eight: Discussion..... | 94 |
| Hypotheses..... | 95 |
| Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2..... | 95 |
| Hypothesis 3 and Hypothesis 4..... | 97 |
| Hypothesis 5 and Hypothesis 6..... | 98 |
| Practical implications..... | 100 |
| Limitations..... | 101 |
| Assumptions..... | 105 |
| Future research..... | 106 |
| Conclusion..... | 107 |
| Bibliography..... | 109 |
| Appendices..... | 131 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Appendix 1: Low risk questionnaire approval letter..... | 131 |
| Appendix 2: Participant information sheet..... | 132 |
| Appendix 3: Questionnaire..... | 134 |
| Appendix 4: Advertisement for participants..... | 142 |

List of figures and tables

| | |
|---|----|
| <i>Figure 1. Bar graph showing the frequency of different types of traumatic incidents that individuals within the study experienced in their life time and answered using the TSS scale (N=108).</i> | 75 |
| <i>Table 1. Demographics of sample</i> | 60 |
| <i>Table 2. Main occupational industry of participants (N=108)</i> | 62 |
| <i>Table 3. Summary of descriptive statistics for measurement scales</i> | 77 |
| <i>Table 4. Spearman’s rank order correlation for measurement scales</i> | 78 |
| <i>Table 5. Summary of hierarchical multiple regression analysis for hypothesis 3</i> | 85 |
| <i>Table 6. Summary of hierarchical multiple regression analysis for hypothesis 4</i> | 87 |
| <i>Table 7. Summary of hierarchical multiple regression analysis for hypothesis 5</i> | 89 |
| <i>Table 8. Summary of hierarchical multiple regression analysis for hypothesis 6</i> | 91 |