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Traumatic Stress Reaction: Cultural Differences

A Thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Psychology at Massey University.

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ABSTRACT

Over the past forty years the domains of cross-cultural psychology and third world psychology have grown considerably. Both are now considered essential approaches for studying other cultures (Mio & Iwamasa, 1993; Pederson, 1993). Although the mental health literature on response to natural disasters has grown considerably in the past few years (Lystad, 1990) there has been limited empirical research on the interaction between culture and trauma and the role played by trauma in traumatic stress reactions (Chemtob, 1996). The object of this study was to explore the influence of cultural differences on disaster perception and traumatic stress. An exploratory study was undertaken in the Fiji Islands. This study examined traumatic stress reaction in three cultural groups: indigenous Fijians, Hindu Indians, and Muslim Indians. The study was conducted in two parts: the first, a qualitative section using open-ended questions. The questions concerned housing, support, socio-economic status, education, and overall expectations. Paton (1997) has identified some of these factors as increasing vulnerability, although not in a cultural context. The second: a quantitative section, involved the construction of a questionnaire (Appendix Eight), itself based on important issues identified by those interviewed in the first section. The purpose-built questionnaire (Expectation/Demand Questionnaire) was designed to assess both the expectations that would be placed upon people by their religious groups and the assistance they would receive from their respective religious organisations. This questionnaire was administered in conjunction with two commercial instruments designed to assess traumatic stress reaction. The results of the Expectation/Demand Questionnaire revealed a statistically significant difference between the three cultural groups in the amount of assistance they expect from their Churches, Mosques, and Temples, and the demands they expect these organisations to make of them. It was hypothesised that other factors may have contributed to the differences between the three groups, including quality of housing, location of housing, ownership of housing, socio-economic status, literacy, and locus of control. These vulnerability factors were used to construct a table (Discussion, 4.0) designed to highlight the risk levels of the three cultures.

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