A TRANSCULTURAL OBSERVATION
OF POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

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In this report I would like to describe a recent encounter with an expert observer of the human condition who offered confirmation of the nature of posttraumatic stress disorder. This disorder found its way into our nomenclature in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 3rd edition, in large measure because of pressure from psychotherapists who were observing Vietnam veterans (unpublished 1977 paper, Shatan and associates).

Yet, since many observers of these same veterans disagreed that their conditions are psychopathological (1), it is useful to find confirmation of the existence of the disorder coming from an individual unfamiliar with our nosological debate and with its cultural context.

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The fact that this expert observer has never been to the United States, and that he comes from a culture very different from ours, suggests that posttraumatic stress disorder really exists, and reflects particular psychodynamics made possible by the nature of intrapsychic structure.

Among Vietnam veterans the disorder is characterized by guilt over survival, depression (at times including suicidal ideation), anxiety, sleep disturbances, nightmares, and flashbacks in which the veteran believes he is back in a traumatic combat situation. In the flashback the veteran tries to rework the trauma, and to resolve it differently. In some cases symptoms appear only after a latency period following because of the sudden death of his father. The young man had a difficult time with that loss, but his real psychological troubles began a few weeks later when his mother remarried the new head of the family, the dead man's brother.

At that point the disorder set in, and the subject became seriously depressed. At times he appeared quite sane, but at other times he seemed bizarro to our expert observer. He had no flashbacks to an event, but he did begin to experience auditory and visual hallucinations of his dead father. I have described this symptom of a stress disorder elsewhere (8).

In his hallucinations the subject heard his father telling him that he was assassinated by his brother, and the father asked the subject to avenge his murder. The young man vowed to comply, but that vow created problems for him, because while he was loyal to his father, he was unable to act against his uncle, feeling overwhelmed by a sense of guilt about harming him. He experienced a terrible conflict, because, as he temporized, he became guilty about not keeping his vow.

Our subject experienced sleep disturbances, as well, and complained of having horrible nightmares. He became dramatically anxious, and under the pressure of his anxiety at times lashed out impulsively. This impulsive behavior frightened his mother and stepfather, who decided to send him away for a rest. In fact, the stepfather, in keeping with the tradition of the country, saw the subject as dangerous, and plotted against him. The subject got wind of the plot, and became further convinced that his stepfather had killed his father.

The subject became resolute in his determination to kill his stepfather. His guilt over surviving his father's death ever increasing, his need for expiation almost unbearable, our subject decided to confront his stepfather, in a situation in which he might kill the usurper but would surely be killed himself in retribution. Our subject did carry this off. There was a tragic mass murder in which the stepfather and the subject both lost their lives. Like the most tragic of our untreated and scorned Vietnam veterans, our subject committed an act symbolic of survivor guilt, destructive to others, and ultimately suicidal.

As can be seen from this case report, observers in other cultures have described posttraumatic stress disorder in exquisite detail. Such case reports lend credence to the existence of the disorder, and cast doubt on the view that it is a condition trumped up by bleeding-heart liberals to embarrass the United States and assist unworthy Vietnam veterans. I did not ask our expert observer's permission to report this material, and, because of current circumstances, such permission cannot now be granted. However, in light of the man's remarkable sensitivity to the human condition, I have no doubt that he would want this case to be reported and identified, and his name to be used. The observer's name is William Shakespeare, the subject is Hamlet, and the setting for this dramatic, yet scientific, experience was a performance by the Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford on Avon, England, in August 1980.

REFERENCES