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History of trauma and posttraumatic disorders in literature

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Summary

In 1980 a third edition of Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) brought diagnostic criteria for a new diagnosis – posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This disorder is a result of highly intensive stressor and in many cases leads to sever psychiatric distress. Despite relatively recent introduction of PTSD as a new diagnosis, this disorder was excessively described in scientific papers as well as in fiction novels. Analysis of those descriptions across ages allows for the conclusion that character and type of stressors has changed, however, people's reactions to highly intensive stressors are basically similar. First descriptions are found in notes of Egyptian physicians and then in papers of Homer, Herodotus and Plutarch. In consecutive parts of this paper, the authors present history of posttraumatic stress disorder describing contribution of Polish authors – Kępiński and Szymusik. Presented historical perspective of posttraumatic stress disorder allows for better understanding of reasons for introducing PTSD into classifications as well as controversies related to it.

Key words: history of psychiatry, posttraumatic stress disorder, PTSD

Introduction

Since the beginning of the humankind it is known that traumatic events such as disasters or wars do change human behaviour and functioning. What is interesting, despite the passing time reactions to traumatic events are not very different then and

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now. Furthermore, psychopathology following such events is almost the same and since 1980 it may be described as post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Introduction of this nozological entity into the DSM-III was controversial and discussions continue endlessly until today. Therapists who worked with rape victims, Holocaust survivors, combat veterans or other traumatised individuals had an appropriate diagnosis to describe signs and symptoms of their patients. Opponents proposed a list of arguments against PTSD composed of, but not limited to following arguments: (a) it will allow lawsuits and disability claims with enormous costs; (b) traumatic memories and reports regarding trauma are not reliable and valid and (c) exposure to specific events lead to psychological distress and additional patologisation is not necessary [1].

In years preceding inclusion of PTSD into DMS-III, multiple changes in PTSD concept were observed all around the world as well as in the United States. Post traumatic reactions were reported by Vietnam War veterans as well, and consequently all traumatic events were taken into consideration while introducing PTSD. Furthermore, trauma and its consequences were considered in some law regulations.

Before first PTSD diagnostic criteria were published, descriptions of PTSD-like disorders were to be found in numerous literature authors starting in ancient times and ending on Kurt Vonnegut. Those descriptions were followed by first medical descriptions the final conclusion of which lead to new diagnostic entity – PTSD with further changes in diagnostic criteria and the newest published in 2013 with DSM-5.

First descriptions of trauma and their consequences

Almost all descriptions of trauma consequences from antiquity are related with war experiences. Such descriptions can be found in writings of almost all know ancient civilizations. Recent data show that the history of PTSD dates back 4000 years. Between 2027 and 2003 B.C. the city of Ur was attacked and destroyed by Sumerian and Elamite civilizations. Trauma of Ur citizens as a consequence of this attack was recorded in cuneiform script [2].

> *The Sumerians and the Elamites, the destroyers, made of it thirty shekels.*
> *The righteous house they break up with pickaxe; the people groan.*
> *The city they make into ruins; the people groan.*
> *Its lady cries: "Alas for my city", cries: "alas for my house".*
> *In its lofty gates, where they were wont to promenade, dead bodies were lying about;*
> *In its boulevards, where the feasts were celebrated, scattered they lay.*
> *In all its streets, where they were wont to promenade, dead bodies were lying about;*

In its places, where the festivities of the land took place, the people lay in heaps.
At night a bitter lament having been raised unto me,
I, although, for that night I tremble,
Fled not before that night's violence.
The storm's cyclone like destruction – verily its terror has filled me full.
Because of its [affliction] in my nightly sleeping place,
In my nightly sleeping place verily there is no peace for me.

In above fragment trouble sleeping is described as well as intrusive traumatic pictures related to exposure to dead bodies.

Next written references of PTSD were made by an Egyptian Army physician 1900 B.C., who described a hysterical reaction of a soldier after experiencing trauma [3].

Unknown author of an epic (third millennium B.C.) of legendary king of city of Ung, Gilgamesh, describes Gilgamesh's despair and consequences of witnessing violent death of his companion Enkidu, who was killed in a battle. Gilgamesh suffers from recurring intrusive memories regarding Enkidu's death and asks numerous questions regarding his own death [4]:

I wept for him seven days and nights till the worm fastened on him. Because of my brother I am afraid of death, because of my brother I stray through the wilderness. His fate lies heavy upon me. How can I be silent, how can I rest? He is dust and I too shall die and be laid in the earth for ever. I am afraid of death…

Other ancient writers also describe trauma consequences. Homer in "The Odyssey" (8th century B.C.) presents Odysseus who suffers from recurring memories of traumatic scenes of battle field accompanied by the guilt of surviving the Trojan War [5]:

I am now safe to perish. Blest and thrice blest were those Danaans who fell before Troy in the cause of the sons of Atreus. Would that had been killed on the day when the Trojans were pressing me so sorely about the dead body of Achilles, for then I should have had due burial and the Achaeans would have honoured my name; but now it seems that I shall come to a most pitiable end.

Again in "The Iliad" Homer describes trauma reactions. Main character, Achilles, was overwhelmed with grief when he was informed about death of Patroclus. He felt guilty as a survivor and intrusive thoughts of his friend would not let him sleep [6]:

…but Achilles still wept for thinking of his dear comrade, and sleep, before whom all things bow, could take no hold upon him… As he dwelt on these things he wept bitterly and lay now on his side, now

on his back, and now face downwards, till at last he rose and went out as one distraught to wander upon the sea-shore.
I would die here and now, in that I could not save my comrade. He has fallen far from home, and in his hour of need my hand was not there to help him. What is there for me? Return to my own land I shall not, and I have brought no saving neither to Patroclus nor to my other comrades of whom so many have been slain by mighty Hector; I stay here by my ships a bootless burden upon the earth.

Code of Hammurabi (1700 B.C.) describes reactive disorders, linking harm with revenge as a part of existing law and order. Similar descriptions are then presented in Old Testament and in "Lex Talionis") [7].

Greek historian Herodotus of Heraklion (484–426 B.C.), known also as the "Father of history" in 6th book of "The History" presents, among others, Marathon battle. During this battle one of soldiers became blind after seeing death of one of his companions [8]:

Epizelus, the son of Cuphagoras, an Athenian soldier, was fighting bravely when he suddenly lost the sight of both eyes, though nothing had touched him anywhere neither sword, spear, nor missile. From that moment he continued blind as long as he lived. I have heard that in speaking about what happened to him he used to say that he thought he was opposed by a man of great stature in heavy armour, whose beard overshadowed his shield; but the phantom passed him by, and killed the man at his side.

In Book IV of "De Rerum Natura" Titus Lucretius Carus describes how intense frightening, recurring dreams of battle can be. He compared behaviour of a sleeping person to behaviour of a person being attacked by a wild animal [9]:

Again, the minds of mortals which perform
With mighty motions mighty enterprises,
Often in sleep will do and dare the same
In manner like. Kings take the towns by storm,
Succumb to capture, battle on the field,
Raise a wild cry as if their throats were cut
Even then and there. And many wrestle on
And groan with pains, and fill all regions round
With mighty cries and wild, as if then gnawed
By fangs of panther or of lion fierce

One of the greatest ancient Greek writers Plutarch of Chaeronea (50–125 B.C.), the author of "Parallel Lives" in a book of Alexander the Great presents a soldier who suffers from recurring, intrusive memories of a battle [10].

In chapter of Gaius Marius, Plutarch describes Gaius' fears of new battles in upcoming new wars which were based on Marius' experience [11]:

> *Marius, himself now worn out with labor and sinking under the burden of anxieties, could not sustain his spirits, which shook within him with the apprehension of a new war and fresh encounters and dangers, the formidable character of which he knew by his own experience…*

The Holy Bible is also a place when trauma consequences can be found. The Book of Job is a presentation of suffering of a man who suddenly lost his family and fortune. This experience made him feel hopeless and exposed to intrusive, recurring nightmares of his lost [12]:

> *Now a thing was secretly brought to me, and mine ear received a little thereof. In thoughts from the visions of the night, when deep sleep falleth on men, Fear came upon me, and trembling, which made all my bones to shake. Then a spirit passed before my face; the hair of my flesh stood up: It stood still, but I could not discern the form thereof: an image was before mine eyes, there was silence…*
> *When I say, My bed shall comfort me, my couch shall ease my complaint; Then thou scarest me with dreams, and terrifiest me through visions: So that my soul chooseth strangling, and death rather than my life.*

The Book of Job is also an example of human resilience even when facing traumatic events.

> *And the LORD turned the captivity of Job, when he prayed for his friends.*

Deuteronomy allow us to say that in antiquity military leaders have known that fighting in a battle might have a negative influence on soldiers' behaviour leading to nervous breakdown. The book presents advice for leaders what should be done in such a situation to prevent a fear among soldiers [13]:

> *When thou goest out to battle against thine enemies, and seest horses, and chariots, and a people more than thou (…) the officers shall say, What man is there that is*
> *fearful and fainthearted? Let him go and return unto his house, lest his brethren's heart faint as well as his heart.*

Dated on 13th century Icelandic Gisli Sursson Saga presents an outlaw Gisli, who killed his brother in law to revenge the other. Successive saga chapters illustrate Gisli who suffers from recurrent and more and more frequent nightmares of past battles which cause anxiety and necessity to sleep in presence of other people [14]:

At last Gisli was so sore pressed with dreams that he grew quite afraid to be alone in the dark, and could not bear to be left by himself, for as soon as ever he shut his eyes the same wife appeared to him. One night it happened that Gisli struggled just a little in his sleep, and Auda asked what had happened.
"I dreamt", says Gisli, "that men came on us, and Eyjolf was along with them and many others beside, and we met, and I knew that there was merry work between us. One of their band came first, grinning and gaping, and methought I cut him asunder in the middle; and methought too he bore a wolf's head. Then many more fell on me, and methought I had my shield in my hand, and held my own a long while".

A medieval French author Jean Froissart (1337–1405) wrote about history of England and France. In 3rd volume of "Chronicles" he presents Count de Foix telling about his brother Sir Peter of Béarn. Sir Peter suffered from recurring nightmares presenting battle images, which resulted in playing battle scenes at night which was dangerous for him and his family [15]:

Sir Peter de Béarn has a custom, when asleep in the night-time, to rise, arm himself, draw his sword, and to begin fighting as if he were in actual combat. The chamberlains and valets who sleep in his chamber to watch him, on hearing him rise, go to him, and inform him what he is doing: of all which, he tells them, he is quite ignorant, and that they lie. Sometimes they leave neither arms nor sword in his chamber, when he makes such a noise and clatter as if all the devils in hell were there. They therefore think it best to replace the arms, and sometimes he forgets them, and remains quietly in his bed.

Signs and symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder can also be found in plays of William Shakespeare. One of the characters of his drama "King Henry IV", Hotspur can be diagnosed with PTSD when you carefully analyse his wife's, Lady Percy, monologue [16]:

O, my good lord, why are you thus alone?
For what offence have I this fortnight been
A banish'd woman from my Harry's bed?
Tell me, sweet lord, what is't that takes from thee
Thy stomach, pleasure and thy golden sleep?
Why dost thou bend thine eyes upon the earth,
And start so often when thou sit'st alone?
Why hast thou lost the fresh blood in thy cheeks;
And given my treasures and my rights of thee

To thick-eyed musing and cursed melancholy?
In thy faint slumbers I by thee have watch'd,
And heard thee murmur tales of iron wars;
Speak terms of manage to thy bounding steed;
Cry, Courage! to the field!' And thou hast talk'd
Of sallies and retires, of trenches, tents,
Of palisadoes, frontiers, parapets,
Of basilisks, of cannon, culverin,
Of prisoners' ransom and of soldiers slain,
And all the currents of a heady fight.
Thy spirit within thee hath been so at war
And thus hath so bestirr'd thee in thy sleep,
That beads of sweat have stood upon thy brow
Like bubbles in a late-disturbed stream;
And in thy face strange motions have appear'd,
Such as we see when men restrain their breath
On some great sudden hest. O, what portents are these?
Some heavy business hath my lord in hand,
And I must know it, else he loves me not.

Hotspur's behaviour was characterised by loss of interests, loneliness, arousal and intrusive memories of battle field both during day and night which is close to PTSD descriptions.

Another Shakespearian character, Mercutio in scene IV of act I of "Rome and Juliet" presents behaviour of a soldier, who is haunted by recurring nightmares of past battles [17]:

And then dreams he of cutting foreign throats
Of breaches, ambuscades, Spanish blades,
Of healths five fanthom deep; and then anon
Drums in his ear, at which he starts and wakes,
And being thus frightened, swears a prayer or two,
And sleeps again.

PTSD-like disorders are presented by Macbeth and Lady Macbeth after murdering the King of Scotland, Duncan. Lady Macbeth suffers from flashbacks, intrusive recollections, makes attempts to remove bloodstains from her hands and finally take her own life. All those symptoms resulting from experienced trauma [18]:

Foul whisp'rings are abroad: unnatural deeds
Do breed unnatural troubles infected minds
To their deaf pillows will discharge their secrets…

Samuel Pepys, an English clerk from the turn of 17th century, in his memoires published in 1660–1669 entitled "Diary" described vividly a Great London fire in September 1666 and its consequences [19]. Pepys describes the horror of fire and residual symptoms of what we now call PTSD. On 15th September 1666 he wrote "But much terrified in the nights now-a-days with dreams of fire, and falling down of houses". Ten (25th September 1666) and twelve days (27th September 1666) later he made two more descriptions of recurring nightmares "All nights still mightily troubled in my sleep with fire and houses pulling down" and "A very furious blowing night all the night; and my mind still mightily perplexed with dreams, and burning the rest of the town…". Furthermore on 28th February 1667, six months after the fire, he reported "I did within these six days see smoke still remaining of the late fire in the City; and it is strange to think how, to this very day, I cannot sleep at night without great terrors of fire, and this very night I could not sleep till almost two in the morning through thoughts of fire". Furthermore, he mentions suicide attempts of those who survived fire and could not protect their goods [19, 20].

Johan Wolfgang Goethe (1749–1832) German poet and dramatist was one of survivors of the battle of Valmy in 1792. In his memoirs he vividly describes sounds of battle as well as feelings of depersonalisation and derealisation induced by this horrifying event [20, 21].

> *The sound is quite strange, as if it were made up of the spinning of a top, the boiling of water, and the whistling of a bird…. I could soon realize that something unusual was happening in me… as if you were in a very hot place, and at the same time impregnated with that heat until you blended completely with the element surrounding you. Your eyes can still see with the same acuity and sharpness, but it is as if the world had put on a reddish-brown hue that makes the objects and the situation still more scary….. I had the impression that everything was being consumed by this fire… this situation is one of the most unpleasant that you can experience.*
>
> *(transl. Marc-Antoine Crocq, MD; Louis Crocq,MD)*

On 9th July 1865 a train to London was derailed at Staplehurst (Kent) causing the death of 10 passengers and another 49 were badly injured. One of the victims of this disaster was great English writer Charles Dickens. He and his companions survived the crash and helped other victims, some of whom died in his presence. This experience affected greatly Dickens' life. He lost his voice for about two weeks. In letters to his friends about moments of terror he wrote that he spent "among the dead and dying, among the frightening views". Moreover he wrote that he had felt weak, had been nervous and his pulse had been low and while travelling by train he had had a feeling

that the carriage was about to crash again and whenever it was possible he was using alternative means of transportation. These symptoms can be clearly interpreted as post--traumatic stress disorder. In his dairies he wrote "I am not quite right, but believe it to be an effect of the railway shaking" [22]. His daughter wrote "my father's nerves never really were the same again... we have often seen him, when travelling home from London, suddenly fall into a paroxysm of fear, tremble all over, clutch the arms of the railway carriage, large beads of perspiration standing on his face, and suffer agonies of terror… he saw nothing for a time but that most awful scene" [23].

One of the greatest Polish authors Bolesław Prus in his novel "Lalka" ("The Doll") also describes the influence of traumatic events presenting a salesman whose thoughts go back to Napoleonic Wars again and again [24]:

> *He dreamt about vast Hungarian plains with blue and white army lines covered with smoke… In the morning his mood was gloomy and he suffered from headache.*
> *In October, around the time when Matejko finished painting his Battle of Grunwald (which is a big and impressive painting, but it should not be shown to those who took part in battles)…*
> *Maybe I could find the bones of my comrades on the old battlefields… Eh! Katz, eh Katz!… do you remember this smoke, this whizz, these signals?*

First edition of an antiwar book of German WWI veteran Erich Maria Remarque "All Quiet on the Western Front" was published in January 1929. The book presents brutal war reality describing physical and mental distress of soldiers facing war meaninglessness [25, 26].

> *Nothing-nothing. My disquietude grows. A terrible feeling of foreignness suddenly rises up in me. I cannot find my way back, I am shut out though I entreat earnestly and put forth all my strength. Nothing stirs; listless and wrenched, like condemned man, I sit there and the past withdraws itself. And the same time I fear to importune it too much, because I do not know what might happen then. I am a soldier, I must cling to that.*

In 1969 a novel "Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death" by Kurt Vonnegut was published for the first time. This science-fiction book was based on author own experience who as a teenager was a soldier during World War II and was captured by Germans during Battle of the Bulge, and as a prisoner of war survived firebombing of Dresden in 1945 which resulted in death of 130,000 of civilians. This event is the main frame of the novel and Billy Pilgrim is its main character. He suffers from nightmares, recurring war recollections and is hypervigilant.

All those symptoms are results of war trauma and it is safe to say that Billy suffered from PTSD in today's meaning of this diagnosis [26, 27].

> *A siren went off, scared the hell out of him. He was expecting the Third World War at any time. The siren was simply announcing high noon. … Billy closed his eyes. When he opened them, he was back in the Second World War again. His head was on the wounded rabbi's shoulder.*

Recapitulation

Trauma and its consequences observed by writers were used by authors of scientific trauma descriptions. First scientific descriptions are from time of Napoleonic war. Dominique Jean Larrey and François Percy described a type of war neurosis using term „cannonball wind syndrome" ("syndrome du vent du boulet") [28]. In following years different names were used in order to describe posttraumatic disorders: "compensation neurosis", "Soldier's Heart", "Exhausted Heart", "Irritable Heart Syndrome", "disorderly action of the heart", "neurocirculatory asthenia", "schreck neurose", "war neurosis", "traumatic neurosis", "concussion of the spine", "shell shock", "battle fatigue" and "combat exhaustion" [29–31]. All of those terms resulted from multitude of different concepts and studies on causes of the observed symptoms. Studies on the disorder nowadays define as PTSD were run by Pierre Janet and Emil Kraepelin and in 20th century by Polish scientist such as Antoni Kępiński, Adam Szymusik, Janusz Heitzman and Maja Lis-Turlejska [30–32].

In 1980 American Psychiatric Association published third edition of Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders and it was the first time when term post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was used [33]. The development of such disorder was related to external stressor. In earlier versions of the classification, i.e. DSM-I and DSM-II [34, 35], different terms were used to describe these disorders. In DSM-I a term "gross stress reaction" was used, however, there were no diagnostic criteria. It was defined as a response to an exceptional physical or mental stressor; it could be diagnosed in people with "normal personality". In the second version of DSM published in 1968 "gross stress reaction" was omitted and categorisation of disorders associated with traumatic stress experience was possible in a group of adaptation disorders. Introduction of a new diagnosis to DSM-III was based on studies among concentration camp survivors, Vietnam and Korean Wars veterans as well as sexual-based offences victims [3, 32, 36]. Since that time the number of publications is rising and there are over 48,000 records in the biggest PTSD database Published International Literature on Traumatic Stress (PILOTS – www.ptsd.va.gov) [37].

The history of PTSD dates way back than 1980 to stories and observations of ancients authors. The character of trauma has changed; however people's reactions to

it have been and will be similar. First descriptions were made by belles-lettres authors and followed by first medical observations introducing different terms to describe a group of symptoms which eventually allowed creating a novel diagnostic category in its present state. Historical point of view facilitates better understanding of diagnostic and therapeutic challenge which is helping patients diagnosed with PTSD.

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