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Psychology and Natural Disasters: Earthquake and Tsunami in Chile on February 27, 2010

Psicología y Desastres Naturales: Terremoto y Tsunami: Del 27 de Febrero de 2010 en Chile

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Resumen

Esta edición especial de Terapia Psicológica surge como un intento por sistematizar la información preliminar recolectada por investigadores acerca de las consecuencias psicológicas del desastre natural ocurrido en la zona centro sur de Chile el 27 de Febrero de 2010. Esta edición también se focaliza en las formas de intervención psicológica que se han aplicado en la distintas zonas devastadas, enfatizándose, además, la necesidad de concebir intervenciones para los efectos de mediano y largo plazo de este fenómeno. Por último, se revisan estrategias utilizadas en otros países para abordar desastres naturales.

Abstract

This special issue of Terapia Psicológica is an attempt to organize preliminary information collected by researchers on the psychological consequences of the natural disaster occurred in the south central zone of Chile on February 27, 2010. This issue is also focused on the types of psychological interventions that have been conducted in the affected zones, also emphasizing the need to define intervention strategies for middle- and long-term effects of this phenomenon. Finally, some intervention strategies applied in other countries are reviewed.

Among the many economic, social, and political impacts of the catastrophe that occurred on February 27, 2010, in Chile, there is the obvious need for a contribution of psychology as a profession in its multiple fields of action (García & Mardones, 2010). This situation certainly implies a social responsibility, because the demand, both explicit and implicit, for professional psychological services has increased suddenly in the affected zones and will most probably continue increasing progressively in the middle term. In order to satisfy these demandas, psychologists must face the challenge of providing concrete, informed, and scientifically valid solutions in the face of a unique and unrepeatable traumatic event, but powerful because of its intensity and the number of settings in which the lives of people have been affected.

The papers included in this issue represent a first sample of the way in which the specialists have reacted to these demands. Most of the articles were written by professionals and researchers who live and work in the devastated zones, and they reflect the strategy that has been followed in the first post-earthquake months.

Two of the papers contain reviews, analyses, and proposals by distinguished foreign psychologists (Echeburúa, 2010; Pineda & López-López, 2010) who describe strategies for psychological interventions in the context of disasters. This is an instance of the direct and immediate support provided by various foreign psychologists and associations to Chilean psychologists. Specifically, Dr. Wilson López, chairman of the ABA Colombia; Dr. Francisco Santolaya, Dean of the Colegio Oficial de Psicólogos de España; and Dr. Enrique Echeburúa, of the Universidad del País Vasco.

The reviews made by Cova & Rincon (2010) point out the importance of prevention and the approach methods and strategies, as well as important contributions in disasters.

Six papers present empirical primary in situ information. Leiva & Quintana (2010) report on a particularly high incidence of panic attacks in people who suffered the loss of goods, and they emphasize the need to create quantitative impact indicators that consider multiple factors. One conclusion that comes from this first report is that although psychologists have contributed significantly to attenuate the consequences of the trauma, those efforts have not been sufficiently systematic and informed. We think that there is a need to formalize a specific professional and research line that we may call "psychology of trauma due to natural disasters."

This lack of systematization of intervention procedures and strategies is put in evidence in the exploratory map of the interventions discussed by Méndez, Leiva, Bustos, Ramos & Moyano-Díaz (2010), who conclude that the interventions made had a rather superficial character in the form of group workshops and were the results of individual initiatives rather than of collective efforts guided by standardized procedures. In that sense, it is particularly important to pay attention to the ways in which these problems have

been approached in the face of similar disasters in other parts of the world. On the other hand, Loubat, Fernández & Morales (2010) as well as Magaña, Silva-Nadales & Rovira (2010) describe the results of post-earthquake interventions focused on certain risk groups in the town of Peralillo and in the city of Concepción, respectively. Jiménez & Cubillos (2010) present an interesting hypothesis of how an organizational intervention that took place before the earthquake may have become a protective factor against the negative labor effects of stress. Finally, Ortiz & Manzo (2010) describes in systematic form the activities done by Chilean Society of Clinical Psychology in the south and center zone of Chile. Inside this, it's presents coordination of trainings to psychologists and health's equipments who worked in area, preparation of written material that was delivered to the people in Santiago city and the work with Investigation Police in the diffusion of information to public in the Talcahuano zero zone.

Finally, it is important to mention that in spite of the drama associated with these events, this natural experiment that occurred in Chile offers us multiple opportunities to investigate, not only the negative consequences of the phenomenon but also remarkable aspects of resilience, spontaneous social organization, and other psychological concepts associated to positive psychology.

We hope that this first analysis will stimulate our scientists to assume the responsibility that we have as professionals and researchers of psychology, as well as reinforce the collective efforts to share data and qualitative and quantitative information that will allow us to advance in the consolidation of a Psychology of natural disasters.

We want to point out that in spite of the little systematization and of not being adequately prepared, Chilean psychologists responded very well in the face of this disaster.

Like never before, in Chile we could observe the constant activity of many psychologists and psychological organizations in the immediate and middle-term intervention in the community and its victims. Even more noteworthy is that groups of researchers made an immediate data search and carried out research that will serve for the advancement of the Chilean as well as the international discipline.

Naturally, the data presented here are just a starting point to carry out research and technological transfer in this field. Psychology has much to say, and there is a fertile ground to make contributions that surely will enhance the relevance and positioning of our profession in these special circumstances.

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