Editorial

Reflections on PTSD’s future in DSM–V

Gerald M. Rosen, Scott O. Lilienfeld, B. Christopher Frueh, Paul R. McHugh and Robert L. Spitzer

Summary

Research findings have fuelled debate on the construct validity of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Accompanying these issues are competing suggestions to redefine PTSD’s criteria, including a recent proposal by DSM–V committee members. We review various approaches to revising the PTSD diagnosis and conclude that proposed changes should be placed in the appendix that the DSM has used for experimental criteria sets.

Declaration of interest

None.

Three decades of research on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) has informed our understanding of post-traumatic psychiatric morbidity. At the same time, the very research spurred by PTSD’s introduction in DSM–III has come to challenge almost every aspect of the construct’s originating assumptions.1,2

PTSD and DSM–V

The current state of affairs surrounding PTSD is reflected in conflicting proposals for how the syndrome should be operationalised in the forthcoming and fifth edition of the DSM (DSM–V), due for publication in 2013. Proposals for how to distinguish traumatic events (Criterion A) from more ordinary stressors have included encouragements to better adhere to current definitions,3 modifications to current wording,4–8 and the radical suggestion that Criterion A should be eliminated entirely.9 In a recent posting on the internet, members of the DSM–V workgroup on PTSD proposed the approach of modifying earlier definitions. In their proposed draft criteria, now available for public comment, the subjective component of a traumatic event (Criterion A2), first introduced in DSM–IV,10 is eliminated altogether, whereas objective aspects of life-threatening traumatic event remains unclear. There has been the suggestion that re-experiencing symptoms (Cluster B: e.g. nightmares) are central because they involve content related to the traumatic event.8 Others have found that re-experiencing symptoms are non-specific stress responses associated with multiple disorders.11 Further, North et al proposed that the hallmark symptoms of post-traumatic morbidity involve avoidance and emotional numbing (Cluster C).6 A more sweeping alternative suggests that PTSD often results from emotions such as anger, guilt and shame, and therefore is not primarily a fear- or anxiety-based condition.12 This viewpoint argues for an entirely new classification category that encompasses a spectrum of traumatic stress disorders, one of which would be PTSD. Most recently, committee members for the DSM–V provided a listing of 21 possible symptoms and signs, grouped into four (rather than the current three) clusters (intrusion symptoms, avoidance, negative affect, hyperarousal).8

It is instructive to recall that the PTSD clinical syndrome was first operationalised in DSM–III13 by only 12 symptoms, grouped into three clusters. This arrangement yielded 135 combinations by which an individual could meet the minimum requisite symptom criteria. In DSM–IV,10 17 symptoms were grouped in the same three clusters, with minimum criteria yielding 1350 combinations. The current proposal for DSM–V, in which 21 symptoms are grouped into four clusters, allows for 10 500 ways to meet minimum requisite criteria! This expansion is beyond anything proposed reduction to 8 combinations in DSM–V. Once again, minimum requisite criteria! This expansion is beyond anything proposed that the DSM has used for experimental criteria sets.

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Gerald M. Rosen (pictured) is a Clinical Professor with the University of Washington’s Department of Psychology, and with the Medical School’s Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences. Scott O. Lilienfeld is Professor of Psychology at Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, past President of the Society for a Science of Clinical Psychology, and current Editor-in-Chief of the Scientific Review of Mental Health Practice. B. Christopher Frueh is a Professor of Psychology at the University of Hawaii, HI, Hawaii, and McNair Scholar and Director of Clinical Research at the Menninger Clinic, Houston, Texas. Paul R. McHugh is a University Distinguished Service Professor of Psychiatry at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, Baltimore, Maryland, having been Psychiatrist-in-Chief at Johns Hopkins Hospital, 1975–2001. Robert L. Spitzer is Professor of Psychiatry in the Department of Psychiatry at Columbia University, New York. He led the development of the third edition of the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM–III) and its revision (DSM–III–R).

Paul R. McHugh is a University Distinguished Service Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at the Texas Medical Center, Houston, Texas.

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vastly increasing permitted heterogeneity at the phenotypic level, DSM–V risks increasing etiological heterogeneity, while providing no resolution to the symptom overlap conundrum.

### A sound scientific alternative

Continuing controversy over how to operationalise PTSD in DSM–V has led to the suggestion that the diagnosis might best be relegated to the manual’s appendix for experimental criteria sets. A concern that such a move would lead to the construct’s demise is not warranted, as illustrated by strong interest in Spitzer’s proposal for binge eating disorder despite its placement in the appendix of DSM–IV. Yet another approach that makes use of the DSM’s appendix for experimental criteria sets is illustrated by the diagnosis of dysthymic disorder. With that diagnosis, an alternative criterion set was listed in the appendix for experimental sets, while extant criteria for dysthymic disorder remained in the main text of DSM–IV.

We believe that use of the DSM’s appendix for experimental criteria sets can operationalise PTSD in a manner that encourages research and allows for treatment of a wide range of post-traumatic reactions, while delaying scientifically premature acceptance of any specific proposal. This approach can also serve to remind clinicians that PTSD in its present form should not be reified to the status of a distinct disorder in nature, at least until such time that we better understand the full range of normal and disordered reactions that occur after traumatic and other high-magnitude stressors.7,14,15

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**References**

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Access the most recent version at DOI: 10.1192/bjp.bp.110.079699

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