Lack of perceived social support among immigrants after a disaster: comparative study

Annelieke N. Drogendijk, Peter G. van der Velden, Berthold P. R. Gersons and Rolf J. Kleber

Background
Disaster research suggests that immigrant groups who are affected by a disaster receive less emotional support than their native counterparts. However, it is unclear to what extent these differences can be attributed to post-disaster mental health problems or whether they were present before the event.

Aims
To examine the association between lack of social support, immigration status and victim status, as well as differences in support between immigrants and Dutch natives with disaster-related post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Method
Social support and psychological distress were assessed among immigrants and Dutch natives, among affected and non-affected individuals 4 years post disaster.

Post-traumatic stress disorder was examined in the affected groups.

Results
Affected immigrants more often lacked various kinds of perceived social support compared with affected Dutch natives. Remarkably, we found no differences in support between affected immigrants and non-affected immigrants. Immigrants with PTSD differ on only two out of six aspects of support from the Dutch natives with PTSD.

Conclusions
Results clearly indicate that differences in support between immigrants and Dutch natives are not so much a consequence of the disaster but were largely present before the disaster.

Declaration of interest
None.

Perceived social support is a term encompassing a variety of characteristics of an individual’s social world and the relationship between the individual and the social environment. Although definitions vary, social support can be defined as those social interactions that provide individuals with actual assistance or embed them into a web of social relationships perceived to be caring and readily available in times of need. The role of perceived social support has been examined in post-traumatic responses following a myriad of traumatic events. With regard to the effects of disasters on the individual as well as the community, the subjective perception of social support is an influential factor in recovery. Studies undertaken after disasters have shown that social support has a stress-buffering effect for post-traumatic problems. Furthermore, perceived lack of social support systems and perceived lack of sharing of emotions have been found to be risk factors for post-disaster mental health disturbances.

With regard to non-Western ethnic minorities, there are two rather contrasting phenomena. On the one hand, certain groups of non-Western ethnic minorities are considered to live in collectivistic communities and in these communities “the self” is defined as part of a larger group such as the family. In the case of emergencies, this would imply that providing social support is more of a compelling duty than a free and voluntary act. People sacrifice their personal interests to benefit the collective, for example the extended family. This suggests that affected members of these communities are likely to receive more social support after disasters than affected Western natives, especially in the long term.

On the other hand, disaster research in Western countries has indicated that disaster victims who were members of ethnic minority groups received less emotional support than their affected counterparts who were members of ethnic majority groups. In addition, empirical studies have shown that they were indeed more at risk than Western natives of developing mental health problems (such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)) after disasters in the short, intermediate and long term. Interestingly, Kaniasty & Norris concluded that lack of social support in the long term is a consequence of mental health problems following a disaster. As a result of more disaster-related problems faced by affected ethnic minorities, they are less likely to receive social support than affected natives.

In line with these contrasting phenomena we tested two hypotheses. The first hypothesis is: affected immigrants receive less social support than non-affected immigrants, and affected Dutch natives receive less social support than their non-affected counterparts as a consequence of the disaster and its related mental health problems. The second hypothesis is in line with the findings of Kaniasty & Norris that the lack of social support is a result of mental health problems: differences in lack of social support between immigrants and Dutch natives are minimal in affected victims with PTSD. To the best of our knowledge, previous studies have not examined these two related hypotheses in one study, using an immigrant and a native comparison group. Thus, for this purpose we examined lack of perceived social support and severe mental health problems among affected and non-affected immigrants and Dutch natives and their non-affected counterparts 4 years after a major disaster. We focused on long-term experiences because it is especially during this period of time that social support may deteriorate.

Method
Background
On 13 May 2000 a devastating explosion in a fireworks storage facility occurred in a residential area in the city of Enschede in The Netherlands. As a result of the explosion, 23 people were killed, 900 were physically injured and approximately 500 homes were destroyed or severely damaged. The Dutch government
declared it a national disaster and decided to launch the comprehensive and comparative Enschede Fireworks Disaster. The medical ethics committee of The Netherlands Organisation for Applied Scientific Research (TNO, Zeist) approved the study protocols, and all of the participants gave their written informed consent.

**Procedures**

The procedures, methods and non-response rates have been described in earlier studies. For this reason, the characteristics of the study design are only described briefly below. The study consisted of three waves of assessments: 2–3 weeks, 18 months and 4 years post disaster. In the first wave all of the adult residents (both immigrants and Dutch natives) of the disaster area were personally invited by letter to participate in the study, and several announcements were made through the local media. The study was conducted among adult residents, passers-by and rescue workers. In the second and third waves a comparison study was carried out.

Immigrants were defined as those who were foreign-born and those who were born in The Netherlands, with at least one non-native parent. In this study the immigrant group contained a large diversity of more than ten different nationalities (from Afghanistan, China, Iraq, Egypt, Eritrea, Syria, Angola, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Algeria, Bosnia Herzegovina, Iran, India, Lebanon and Mozambique), with the largest group of immigrant victims and controls in our study being people of Turkish origin (43% in the affected group and 58% in the control group). Dutch natives were defined as those individuals who were born in The Netherlands with neither parent born outside of The Netherlands.

The comparison group were adults who had not been exposed to the disaster and who were residents of Tilburg, a town located in another part of The Netherlands with neither parent born outside of The Netherlands. The comparison group comprised 640 non-exposed adult residents of the city of Tilburg, located in another part of The Netherlands. They lived in a comparable residential area, i.e. comparable in the composition of the population and general health status. They participated in the second wave (response 61.0%) and the third wave (response 78.5%).

**Measures**

Demographic information concerning gender, age and level of education was obtained for the questionnaire. This, including informed consent, was in Dutch, but it was also available in English, German and Turkish. The questionnaires, including the Turkish questionnaire, were translated and back translated according to the procedure of Van de Vijver & Leung.

Psychological distress

The 90-item Symptom Checklist (SCL–90–R) was administered to examine psychological distress. The SCL–90–R has a five-point Likert scale (from 1, 'not at all' to 5, 'extremely') and assesses symptoms over the previous 7 days. The Dutch cut-off scores for males and females of a normal population were used to identify respondents with severe psychological distress (total score). The internal consistencies were excellent ($\alpha$ = 0.86).

PTSD

The 22-item Self-Rating Scale for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (SRS–PTSD) was administered among the affected residents to assess disaster-related PTSD (based on the criteria of DSM–IV) during the previous 4 weeks. Individuals with a positive score on all three subscales: intrusions (a score of at least one item from five items); avoidance reactions (a score of at least three items from seven items); and hyperarousal symptoms (a score of at least two items from five items) are considered to have a PTSD. Cronbach’s alpha was excellent ($\alpha = 0.95$).

Lack of perceived social support

The 34-item Social Support List Discrepancy (SSL–D) was administered to all respondents to assess six important aspects of lack of perceived social supports: everyday emotional support, emotional support in response to problems, appreciation of support, instrumental support, social companionship and informative support. This frequently used questionnaire assesses the extent to which the received support is in accordance with the needs of the respondent. The questionnaire starts with ‘What is your opinion about the extent to which people . . . followed by items such as ‘. . . are affectionate towards you?; ‘. . . ask you to join in?; ‘. . . drop in for a pleasant visit?; ‘. . . give information about where to get things?’. The items have a four-point Likert scale: 1, ‘I miss it, I would like it to happen more often’; 2, ‘I don’t really miss it, but it would be nice if it happened a bit more often’; 3, ‘just right, I would not want it to happen more or less often’; 4, ‘it happens too often, it would be nice if it happened less often’. The item scores were recorded ($1 = 3, 2 = 2; 3, 4 = 1$). All of the Cronbach’s alphas were excellent ($\alpha \geq 0.84$).
Resources of social support
Among the affected residents, resources of social support were examined based on the work of Rime and colleagues, using two related questions: ‘How many people around you can you count on in the event of problems or difficulties (not related to the fireworks disaster)?’ and ‘How many people around you can you count on in the event of problems or difficulties (if any) related to the fireworks disaster?’. Responses were made on a seven-point Likert scale (1, ‘nobody’ to 7, ‘20 or more different people’). Our cut-off score was >1. People with one or more people they could count on for emotional problems were defined as having a resource for social support.

Data analyses
Chi-squared tests were conducted to assess the differences in the mental health problems experienced by the affected residents and the comparison group in demographic variables. In addition, chi-squared tests were used to examine the differences in sources of support for both groups of affected residents. All of the analyses were carried out using SPSS version 16 for Windows.

With respect to our first hypothesis, the differences in social support between the four study groups were tested by means of a one-way ANOVA. Psychological distress, gender, age and educational level were controlled by means of covariates in the one-way ANOVA. For our second hypothesis, the aforementioned analyses were repeated among both groups of disaster victims with and without disaster-related PTSD.

Results

Demographic characteristics
The four study groups (affected immigrants, affected Dutch natives, comparison immigrants and comparison Dutch natives) did not differ in gender (Table 1). The immigrants had a rather low educational level: about 60% of the victims and the comparison group had attained no more than primary or junior high school levels of education (Table 1). The differences in low educational levels were significant between the immigrant groups and the Dutch natives groups (affected group: $\chi^2 = 18.9$, d.f. = 1, $P < 0.001$; comparison group: $\chi^2 = 9.8$, d.f. = 1, $P < 0.01$). The percentages with regard to low education level did not differ significantly between the affected and the non-affected immigrants, or between the affected and the non-affected Dutch natives. In this sample most of the respondents were married or had a permanent partner and there were no significant differences between the four study groups.

Psychological distress and PTSD
Four years post disaster the majority of the affected residents in the immigrant group (63.4%) had severe psychological distress (Table 1). Compared with the affected Dutch native group ($\chi^2 = 108.8$, d.f. = 1, $P < 0.001$) and the comparison immigrant group ($\chi^2 = 16.0$, d.f. = 1, $P < 0.001$), the affected immigrant group suffered significantly more from psychological distress. The differences in psychological distress between the affected Dutch native group and the comparison Dutch native group were smaller, although significant ($\chi^2 = 7.6$, d.f. = 1, $P < 0.01$). Furthermore, a significantly higher percentage of the affected immigrant group had PTSD compared with the affected Dutch native group ($\chi^2 = 105.2$, d.f. = 1, $P < 0.001$).

Differences in social support and aspects of perceived social support
Approximately 30% of the affected immigrant group could not share their emotional feelings (in general or related to the disaster) with a single person (Table 1). This percentage is significantly higher than that of the affected Dutch native group (4 and 7% respectively).

Table 2 shows that when controlling for psychological distress, gender and age, the differences in lack of perceived social support between the affected immigrant group and the affected Dutch native group remained significant for all types of social support (the F-values range from $F = -46.2$, d.f. = 1, $P < 0.001$ for instrumental support to $F = 17.4$, d.f. = 1, $P < 0.001$ for informative support). Interestingly, the differences in lack of social support between the affected immigrant group and the comparison immigrant group were not significant.

Table 1

| Table 1 Demographic characteristics, social resources and psychological problems |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
|                                  | Affected residents, n (%)       | Comparison group, n (%)          |
|                                  | Immigrant group | Dutch native group | Immigrant group | Dutch native group | $\chi^2$ | d.f. | $P$ |
| Gender                           |                      |                      |                      |                      |            |     |     |
| Female                           | 123 (58.0)           | 427 (56.5)           | 66 (58.4)           | 295 (56.0)           | 0.4       | 3    | ns  |
| Male                             | 89 (42.0)            | 329 (43.5)           | 47 (41.6)           | 232 (44.0)           | 19.2      | 6    | 0.004 |
| Age, years                       | 125 (61.9)           | 326 (44.6)           | 72 (64.3)           | 250 (48.0)           | 34.3      | 6    | <0.001 |
| Education level                  |                      |                      |                      |                      |            |     |     |
| Primary school/junior school     | 57 (28.2)            | 244 (33.4)           | 27 (24.1)           | 169 (32.4)           | 19.2      | 6    | 0.004 |
| Senior high/professional         | 20 (9.9)             | 161 (22.0)           | 13 (11.6)           | 102 (19.6)           | 34.3      | 6    | <0.001 |
| High professional/university     | 20 (11.5)            | 127 (18.2)           | 10 (10.8)           | 77 (15.7)            | 7.1       | 3    | 0.01  |
| Social resources                 |                      |                      |                      |                      |            |     |     |
| No people to count on for emotional problems | 56 (28.7)          | 33 (4.4)              | 106.0 (1) <0.001    | 76.5 (1) <0.001     | 10.6 (1) <0.001 |
| Psychological problems           |                      |                      |                      |                      |            |     |     |
| Psychological distress           | 118 (63.4)           | 173 (23.6)           | 43.0 (39.4)         | 89 (17.2)            | 162.1     | 3    | <0.001 |
| Post-traumatic stress disorder   | 80 (41.0)            | 75 (10.2)            | 105.6 (1) <0.001    | 20 (4.4)             | 162.1     | 3    | <0.001 |

ns, not significant.
Differences in perceived social support among individuals with and without PTSD

As expected, the affected immigrant group with PTSD reported the same levels of lack of perceived everyday emotional support, emotional support with problems, esteem support and informative support as the Dutch native group with PTSD (Table 3). However, the levels of a lack of perceived instrumental support \( (F = 6.0, \text{ d.f.} = 1, P < 0.05) \) and informative support \( (F = 3.3, \text{ d.f.} = 1, P < 0.05) \) were significantly different for the two affected groups. This means that the affected immigrant group felt that they would have liked to have received more instrumental support (such as a loan of money or a helping hand) and informative support (such as constructive criticism) than the affected Dutch native group.

In line with our hypotheses and the former analyses with regard to our comparison group, significant differences were found in the group of affected residents without PTSD (Table 3). Among the affected residents without PTSD, the affected immigrant group perceived less emotional support, emotional support with problems, esteem support and informative social support than the affected Dutch native group (Table 3; the \( F \)-values range from \( F = 28.1, \text{ d.f.} = 1, P < 0.001 \) for instrumental support to \( F = 5.9, \text{ d.f.} = 1, P < 0.02 \) for informative support).

Main findings

This is the first comparative disaster study that has focused on the lack of perceived social support among affected immigrants and Dutch natives, as well as among non-affected residents. Were differences to be found in perceived social support 4 years after a disaster? Were these differences related to psychological symptoms or were they already present? Our results show that, in particular, the immigrant groups lacked social support in general. Our results reveal that the differences in lack of social support (often found in disaster studies) are not so much a result of the fact that immigrants experience relatively more psychosocial stress after a disaster, but originate in the lack of social support for immigrants in general.

This study confirms our first hypothesis: immigrants lacked social support more than native Dutch victims. We found that 4 years after the disaster a third of the affected immigrant group felt that they did not have one single person to talk to and they had no one with whom they could share their emotional problems. This should be considered a devastating decrease of their social support system. Among the affected Dutch native group the percentage was much lower. Furthermore, as expected, the affected immigrant group had a higher deficiency in social support than the affected Dutch native group.

This raises the question: did this lack of post-disaster social support have a long-term effect on the immigrants in particular? Remarkably, our results show that the affected and non-affected immigrant groups did not differ in deficiency of social support. This is in contrast to our first hypothesis. However, the results confirm the second hypothesis: among a group of disaster victims with comparable severe mental health problems (such as PTSD), the differences in lack of social support between the immigrant group and the Dutch native group were minimal.

Possible explanations

How can these findings be explained? After a traumatic experience such as a disaster social support is an important aspect of disaster recovery.\(^8\) Received support has been found to increase in the aftermath of a disaster\(^29\) and to be positively correlated with the severity of exposure.\(^30\) At first, just after the disaster, people look after each other, help each other to survive, and in a shattered community it is acceptable to talk about the events and the

### Table 2: Association between group and lack of perceived social support 4 years post disaster

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lack of perceived support</th>
<th>Immigrant group</th>
<th>Dutch native group</th>
<th>Comparison group, mean (s.d.)</th>
<th>Some statistical values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of perceived everyday emotional support</td>
<td>7.35 (2.61) (^a)</td>
<td>5.78 (2.22) (^bc)</td>
<td>6.20 (2.28) (^bc)</td>
<td>F(^d) = 5.9, d.f. = 1, P = 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of perceived emotional support with problems</td>
<td>14.39 (5.10) (^a)</td>
<td>11.15 (3.87) (^bc)</td>
<td>12.25 (4.32) (^bc)</td>
<td>F(^d) = 7.9, d.f. = 1, P &lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of perceived esteem support</td>
<td>10.22 (3.66) (^a)</td>
<td>8.08 (2.57) (^bc)</td>
<td>8.51 (2.76) (^bc)</td>
<td>F(^d) = 9.7, d.f. = 1, P &lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of perceived instrumental support</td>
<td>12.31 (4.11) (^a)</td>
<td>9.37 (2.83) (^bc)</td>
<td>11.02 (3.79) (^bc)</td>
<td>F(^d) = 25.7, d.f. = 1, P &lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of perceived social companionship</td>
<td>8.91 (3.16) (^a)</td>
<td>7.04 (2.49) (^bc)</td>
<td>7.82 (2.91) (^bc)</td>
<td>F(^d) = 7.9, d.f. = 1, P &lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of perceived informative support</td>
<td>7.00 (2.53) (^a)</td>
<td>5.59 (1.93) (^bc)</td>
<td>5.93 (2.06) (^bc)</td>
<td>F(^d) = 8.2, d.f. = 1, P &lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Values with a different character in superscript (a, b or c) vary significantly (when controlled for psychological distress, gender, age and education, P < 0.05).

### Table 3: Association between group and lack of perceived social support 4 years post disaster in disaster affected groups with or without post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lack of perceived support</th>
<th>Immigrant group</th>
<th>Dutch native group</th>
<th>Immigrant group</th>
<th>Dutch native group</th>
<th>Some statistical values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of perceived everyday emotional support</td>
<td>8.20 (2.52) (^a)</td>
<td>8.08 (2.82) (^bc)</td>
<td>6.81 (2.51) (^bc)</td>
<td>5.52 (2.00) (^b)</td>
<td>F(^d) = 17.1, d.f. = 3, P &lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of perceived emotional support with problems</td>
<td>16.29 (5.07) (^a)</td>
<td>15.40 (5.09) (^bc)</td>
<td>13.16 (4.79) (^b)</td>
<td>10.30 (4.32) (^b)</td>
<td>F(^d) = 14.5, d.f. = 3, P &lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of perceived esteem support</td>
<td>12.04 (3.86) (^a)</td>
<td>10.69 (3.26) (^b)</td>
<td>9.09 (3.08) (^b)</td>
<td>7.80 (2.32) (^b)</td>
<td>F(^d) = 21.9, d.f. = 3, P &lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of perceived instrumental support</td>
<td>14.28 (4.20) (^a)</td>
<td>12.40 (3.67) (^b)</td>
<td>11.13 (3.61) (^b)</td>
<td>9.05 (2.53) (^b)</td>
<td>F(^d) = 29.2, d.f. = 3, P &lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of perceived social companionship</td>
<td>10.30 (3.32) (^a)</td>
<td>9.14 (3.03) (^b)</td>
<td>8.11 (2.78) (^b)</td>
<td>6.81 (2.33) (^b)</td>
<td>F(^d) = 13.7, d.f. = 3, P &lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of perceived informative support</td>
<td>8.14 (2.64) (^a)</td>
<td>7.10 (2.37) (^b)</td>
<td>6.27 (2.23) (^b)</td>
<td>5.42 (1.77) (^b)</td>
<td>F(^d) = 12.8, d.f. = 3, P &lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Values with a different character in superscript (a, b or c) vary significantly (when controlled for psychological distress, gender, age and education, P < 0.05).

d. Controlled for psychological distress, gender, age and education.
experiences. However, the availability and quality of social support systems can change in the long term. Often, social support declines as a function of time. The way that social support interacts with mental health problems after a disaster varies over time. In the first months after a disaster social support is a buffer for psychological stress. However, Kaniasty & Norris suggested that a decline in social support in the long term is not uncommon in victims with higher levels of psychological stress. If individuals continue to show signs of severe psychological difficulties, this can infringe on the community spirit of successful recovery and, as a result, the attention and support from the social surroundings decline. Studies in the general Norwegian population have shown that the lack of social support, especially in non-Western ethnic minority groups, is related to a poor mental health outcome. However, this does not explain our finding of the lack of social support in the more healthy affected and non-affected immigrant groups.

Kaniasty & Norris raised the question: why do ethnic minorities not participate more fully in their evolving altruistic community? This study gives an answer to this question. It is likely that the lack of perceived social support was not because of the deteriorated situation of the immigrants after a disaster. In fact, the results indicate that the social support system of the immigrant group, in general, is not adequate enough, especially when compared with that of the (affected or non-affected) Dutch native groups. In other words, the lack of social support often found in disaster studies is not the result of the fact that the immigrant groups experience relatively more psychosocial stress after a disaster; the differences originate in the lack of social support in the immigrant groups in general. What can explain these ethnic differences in the groups of victims without PTSD? More collectivistic and family-focused cultures foster a focus on group membership, contexts and relationships, and personal feelings, and their free expression may be relatively less important. A study by Matsumoto et al. of various cultures showed that people in individualistic cultures endorse more emotional expression in interaction with members of their in-group, whereas people in collectivistic cultures endorse less.

Another important factor is the status of immigrants. Whereas the home culture of many minority groups in Western Europe is rather collectivistic and the need to look after each other is strong, the culture of a migrant may be less connected to this than the native majority. The migration has resulted in a condition distinctive from the homeland culture as well as from the new culture of the host country; the so-called condition migrante, meaning the conflict of living between two cultures, in combination with the resulting social isolation, uprootedness and low socioeconomic status. A study in Norway found that non-Western migrants had a lower level of social support compared with native Norwegians. Mediterranean (mainly Turkish and Moroccan) immigrants in The Netherlands tend to have a rural background with a commitment to the extended family and traditional religious practices, and had (and still have) to deal with an urban, secular and individualistic Western society. The stresses and psychosocial problems that these people cope with every day can affect their social structures. A qualitative study among Turkish victims affected by the Enschede disaster in The Netherlands showed that especially the younger first generation (who had migrated from Turkey to The Netherlands in order to marry Turkish Dutch immigrants) might have a small social network. These (mostly) women depended (both socially and economically) on the family of their spouse. With a lack of access to Dutch society they reported that they did not have friends on whom they could rely. Furthermore, their close family lived in Turkey and, as a result of financial problems because of the disaster, they did not maintain much contact with them.

In addition, in the stricken ethnic minority community multiple households of the extended families were affected. It is not surprising, therefore, that there was a lack of social support after the Enschede Fireworks Disaster as there were complex practical and financial difficulties that had to be overcome. Most of the affected individuals’ houses were largely destroyed. Furthermore, as a consequence of having an immigrant background, people may have had fewer individual resources (and the resources of the family may have been smaller) than the Dutch native victims. Practical problems such as the need to shelter more families caused crowded conditions to develop. Over time these stressful living conditions can result in strained family relations.
differences in lack of social support between immigrants and Dutch natives 4 years post disaster are not so much a consequence of the disaster but were largely present before the disaster.

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