

Post-traumatic Disorders in survivors after the earthquake of 1908 and the Italian-Turkish war

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Abstract

Usually the first psychological reflections about post traumatic disorders date back to studies carried out during the first World War, nevertheless important investigations about nosological autonomy of serious traumatic syndrome were also implemented in the southern Italy. In particular D'Abundo had fixed the importance of the grave post-traumatic psychic manifestations, including punctual and accurate descriptions of the symptomatology and the relative psychopathological reflections, studying and analyzing the psychical and mental post-traumatic manifestations produced by natural and military disasters. This author analyzed various clinical cases in order to compare these different types of post traumatic stress disorder, highlighting both the similarities and, above all, the differences between the consequences of these two traumatic events and so the necessity of a different kind of psychological intervention.

Keywords: Post-traumatic disorder, D'Abundo, Earthquake, War

In a previous work, the importance of the scientific support of a southern author was evidenced. Surely ignored, he was interested in the psychological effects caused by serious traumas and he identified and studied the neuropsychological disorders in the survivors of 1908 Messina earthquake. In fact, even if the first psychological reflections about psychiatric and psychoanalytic nosology generally date back to studies carried out during the first World War and later in the American and Russian – Japanese military conflict, we want to recognise that important investigations about nosological autonomy of serious traumatic syndrome were also implemented in the southern Italy. Apart from the nosographic classification difficulties of the classic or psychoanalytic school psychiatrists, we do not neglect the clinic work of Italian doctors, who gave remarkable clinical and epistemological support, even if they were obscured by a preconception based on a centre-“periphery” model overflowing in Europe in that period (Keel O. 2007). In effect, the scholar and psychiatric doctor denounced the lack of specific literature about the neurological alterations of the traumatized, although not underestimating the “not light difficulties” in attending a big number of ill and hurt people, about whom was difficult to outline an accurate anamnesis because of the upsetting caused by military events and the Nature’s strength. With regards to this, a previous topic about the neuro-psychic disorders after the pain of the Italian- Turkish war, reiterated and experimented in Messina after the earthquake of 1908, was reclaimed in a conference discussed by the professor G. D’Abundo in Catania in 1912 (D’Abundo G. 1912), at the Natural Sciences Academy. In that clinical annotation, D’Abundo, who filled an important office in the University of Catania in that period, studied and analyzed the psychical and mental post-traumatic manifestations produced by natural and military disasters. He was from Puglia, after graduating in medicine in Naples in 1884, he definitively became chair of neuropsychiatry in Catania and, thanks to his initiatives supported by the funds of the University and of the hospital’s administration, he got to transform two areas of Garibaldi’s hospital in a modern Institute suitable to host 60 beds for “nervous” patients and 150 for “mentally ill” patients.

He was a versatile spirit able to conduct in-depth analysis in various cultural fields and to approach broad-spectrum experimentations about human psyche, he was above all interested in neuropathology. His mentor Leonardo Bianchi (1848-1927), was considered one of the fathers of Neuropsychiatry, he reunited in 1884 the two Psychiatry and Neuropathology disciplines and this was the first of the reiterated marriages and subsequent divorces between the two sciences. Considering , as we said, that appropriate studies about the disorders in nervous system of soldiers in war and people experiencing earthquake did not exist, D’A. had already observed that the telluric epileptic convulsion of December the 28th, that transformed, on the instant, exuberant of energy and human activity centres into necropolis, had necessarily to reverberate on the nervous system of many people in a quite wide-spreading perimeter of resonance. Some researches had been carried out in the Hispano-American war and in the Transwaal and Russian-Japanese ones, but the conflict troubles prevented to assemble accurate clinic histories.

In his first lines, it is noted an accentuated inclination to use a psychiatric terminology both in the seismic phenomenon and in the human one, in a sort of symbiosis between a macrocosm and a microcosm, agitated by the Nature’s strength. It is also relevant that the author had fixed, in this “original” communication about the neuropathic effects of the

earthquake in 1908 in Sicily (D'Abundo G. 1909; Lentini R.M. 2009 a; b), the importance of the grave post-traumatic psychic manifestations, including punctual and accurate descriptions of the symptomatology and the relative psychopathological reflections. "The nervous system excited in a tumultuous vibration by a Nature's symptom so grandiose for destroying power, instantaneousness and incurability, had to present as depressed the most elevated functions of the psychic sphere, while the primitive feelings of personal conservation and fear naturally rose like giants, and omnifarious pathologic manifestations occurred in those subjects in which the morbid organic attitudes, hereditary or acquired are ordinary appeased, ready to onset with psychological hurricanes too" (D'Abundo G.1909).

D'A., at the beginning of his prolusion, makes a short historical digression about other earthquakes, cyclically repeated in this extreme strip of Italy, theatre of many tragic episodes, produced by rivers of red-hot magma. And Catania, where the majestic Etna, with its criminal past, kept in acute trepidation the souls of many people, was the first to help hurt people and refugees, more than 20000, of his beautiful and unlucky sister, showing a sincere patriotism and an exuberant civility.

In general-the scholar observes- we can notice that the exaggeration of altruistic feelings that can be considered as a psychological manifestation predominant in people from Catania, characterized the grandiosity and the self-confidence of a town, to whom a splendid future is reserved. This happy and forward-looking forecast of D'A., born in Barletta, doubtless symbolizes the strong attachment to Sicily and to the Catania's environment which is so strong that he defines himself "catanese" for adoption. The Sicilian generosity and prodigality is underlined by our scholar also in the Italian-Turkish conflict when all the hospitals of Sicily and of "southern Italy" had brotherly hosted with enthusiasm our ill and hurt brave soldiers: above all Catania, with his pronounced patriotism, had hosted them in the Municipal Hospice and in the Garibaldi Hospital, where there was just the Prof. D'Abundo's clinic. All the ill people back from the war flow here after the earthquake's victims. It is clear that common diagnostic elements had been detected for the soldiers as well as for the earthquake victims, kept tabs, but D'A. pointed out that there could be many different situations and psychological pains they both could have suffered. The rapid alarms and intense poignancy of combats, if on one hand they violently and sharply explained their action on the nervous system of the soldiers, especially if predisposed, on the other hand they, in any case, find an organism in physical and psychological weakened conditions. Instead, the contrary happened in the rail disasters or in the earthquakes, here the emotional element sharply acted on inheritance predisposed to neuro-psychopaths, but not weakened by previous and continuous emotions and pains.

Effects On People From Messina

These are considerations gleaned by medical investigations conducted on ill, traumatized by external events people and affected in the nervous system. Apart from hurt people, who showed a strong psychic depression, a state of deep apathy and monotony prevail in the other asylum-seekers. They talked about excruciating and very arduous facts with a lifeless look, as if they were not really affected by them, with lacking expressiveness and emotionality exposition; a deep feeling of resignation linked to the fact that the tragedy had affected everybody at the unison, prevailed. This caused a psychological attenuation of the emotional individual reaction and the thought of being survivors tented to hypertrophy the auto-conservation's feelings. However, the colossal fear the inconceivable suffering of the grave grieves experienced, also induced important psychic

disorders similar to a sensorial acute “frenosi” included in a merely psychopathic framework.

Effects On People Far From Messina

The deep shock suffered could cause the onset of inhibitory manifestations in the social collective psychic life in subject far from the seismic epicentre too. As a consequence there was a great slowdown in the working activities and in the social life relationships precisely in Catania and in the surrounding areas, where many people left the job, bowed down by a deep sense of inhibition. The long lasting of the seismic movement had deeply upset many people that, though not having directly suffered this experience, started to have real visual and auditive hallucinations, bowed down a strong fear on a level of obsession. They often look at the hanging lamp in order to verify possible vibratory stimulus: they were impressionable and neurotic subjects who, in the days after the earthquake started to feel restlessness, anxiety, anguish with outstanding pallor, lavishing sweating, general trembles, tachycardia, hypothermia. They had a sense of deep unease, with deficit of urinary secretion and increasing phosphates and great presence of urea in the urine. The fear that the seismic disaster of previous centuries could occur, allowed many people to talk about his argument for the whole day, to use some devices as, for example, sleeping, keeping dresses for the night, in an armchair under an arch of the most thick walls with a small suitcase full of valued objects. The injectionary therapy opiate formulations, lukewarm prolonged and with the psychotherapy support, weakened the neurasthenic symptoms in almost ten days.

Effects On The Insane People In The Clinic Of Catania

Just one of the 105 hospitalized during the shake last 40 minutes seconds was afraid and crying hide himself under the bed, one just cried; the others remained indifferent. These are broadly evaluations and the sectorial investigations carried out by D'A., correlated by the presentation of many clinical cases of ill people personally cured by him. The signs of the modernity of this scholar and of his foresight in asserting the importance of post-traumatic syndrome, that in that historical period was not still enough studied and in considering the predisposing neuro-psychopathic hereditary acquired element, were clear and significant. On the other hand, as properly supported by Prof. Murri (Murri A. 1912), it is not expected that all the people that apparently look sane, are really sane. Therefore in support of the Murri's teaching, D'A. confirms that the strong emotions represent true reactives to assay the index of the organic neuropsychic resistance of each person. However, in the described cases, the depressive form with psycho-sensorial disorders above all visual revealed itself to be prevalent. The starting phase of this psychosis and the related development were rapid with a generally good exitus: a real cinematographic execution (D'Abundo G. 1911). In this respect, see the interesting observations of G. D'Abundo, *Sopra alcuni particolari effetti delle proiezioni cinematografiche nei nevrotici*, *Italian Journal of Neuropathology, Psychiatry and Electrotherapy*, pp.433-442. In the Messina disaster the psychopathic forms cured last between 2 and 4 months and got over with total amnesia of the psychotic period. But it is enormous the difference of importance between the commotion of the catastrophe of Messina on the people buried under the ruins and the commotion of the military events in Libya on the soldiers. The Messina earthquake damaged people who could not foresee anything of the terrible catastrophe, there was a state of latent, unconscious, durable

emotion reinforced by a compound of causes determining tacit sentimental conflicts, therefore the fight, or awaking with a jump because of alarm, represented the true drop of water that made the vase overflow. Unlike the “earthquaked” people, the post-traumatic stress syndrome presented more articulate implications and required a more adequate psychological and sociological approach to the enlisted soldiers. The solution proposed by D’A. was to realize a real preventive selection in order to avoid sending under arms predisposed to neuropsychosis people, who would had been able to determine grave bothers.

It would have been useful that the sanitary authorities were provided of a familiar and individual anamnestic story already during the military control at 20 years old, that could evidence the neuro-psychopathic aspects of the family, archiving sanitary dates and synthetic concepts on the intellectual potential and on the particular attitudes in the social life of every soldier (Cazzullo c.L. 2000). See C.L. Cazzullo, *Storia breve della psichiatria italiana vista da un protagonista* Milano, 2000 p. 106: “It is impossible to disown that Psychiatry always used, on one side, a language and a semantic of a refined cultural matrix, and that, on the other side, those ambitions that Koupernik euphemistically calls “imperialistic”, that have a relationship with people’s private life, with the history of their family, often tenaciously protected, with the more implied aspirations of their professional life”.

In conclusion, D.A. considered the commotion suffered for war events a very different etiologic moment from the one suffered for the earthquake or for a railway disaster, that explicate a rapid action on subjects that, without a doubt, differed from militaries who did not suffer a continuous tension for an ensemble of affective psychological, physical and social causes. So he analyzed various clinical cases, in order to confirm their partially autonomy nosological context.

With these in-depth analysis on militaries and earthquaked people, D.A. not only created a great interest in the scientific world but gave, with his mentor Murri, an important support to what refers to post-traumatic syndrome, whose study is usually attributed to not-Italian researchers.

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