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Explosive anger as a response to human rights violations in post-conflict Timor-Leste

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Abstract

Over several decades, clinicians have documented a pattern of explosive anger amongst survivors of gross human rights violations. Yet there is a dearth of epidemiological research investigating explosive anger in post-conflict countries. In the present study undertaken in Timor-Leste between March and November 2004, we identified an indigenous descriptor for explosive anger, including this index in the East Timor Mental Health Epidemiological Needs Study, a small area total population survey of 1544 adults living in an urban and a rural area. Other measures included indices of past trauma events, post-traumatic stress and general psychological distress, and socio-demographic variables. We found that 38% of the population reached the defined threshold of one attack of explosive anger a month (average = 1 episode every 2–3 days). Only a minority of persons with explosive anger reached threshold scores for post-traumatic stress and general psychological distress. High levels of trauma exposure represented

the strongest predictor of explosive anger. Latent class analysis identified three sub-groups with explosive anger: young trauma-affected adults living in the capital city who were unemployed; an older group, predominantly men, who had experienced extensive violence, including combat, assault and torture; and a less well characterized group of women. The findings offer support for a sequential model of explosive anger in which experiences of past persecution are compounded by frustrations in the post-conflict environment. The data provide a foundation for exploring further the role of trauma-induced anger in the cycles of violence that are prevalent in post-conflict countries.



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Keywords

Mental health; Post-conflict; Anger; Trauma; Timor leste; Human rights

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Zulmira Fonseca C Amaral played a vital role in the study. She provided cultural consultancy to the project, assisted with negotiating access to the participating communities, and managed the data collection process.

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