Addressing trauma and aggression in young migrants

Research collaboration led by Konstanz neuropsychologist, Thomas Elbert, receives “ERC Proof of Concept Grant” to use research on trauma and violence to develop mental healthcare

How do experiences with stress and violence determine, define and organize the memories of young people? Can certain psycho-physiological mechanisms related to violence and trauma alter the functional organization of the mind in a way that is problematic for the individual and society as a whole? The project MemoTV (Memories of Traumatic Stress and Violence), funded by an ERC Advanced Grant and coordinated by the University of Konstanz, addresses these questions using a particularly innovative approach. At the heart of the research are the specific memory structures in the brain that result from experiencing and committing violent acts. The project teams in Konstanz, Burundi (Université Lumiere, Bujumbura), South Africa (University of Stellenbosch) and Brazil (National School of Public Health of Rio de Janeiro, Oswaldo Cruz Foundation) are researching these mnemonic processes at the epigenetic, neural and cognitive levels.

Using the ERC Proof of Concept Grant provided by the European Science Council, the researchers will now design mental healthcare based on their findings. Professor Thomas Elbert, Dr Maggie Schauer and Dr Danie Meyer-Parlapanis will lead the effort to develop a training curriculum for mental health care tailored specifically to the challenges and needs of traumatized youth who are arriving in the EU: for young migrants who have experienced massive violence and often have a low threshold for aggression themselves.

The MemoTV project examined the memories of those who have experienced traumatic stress and violence in four different cultural contexts: the refugee and trauma outpatient services in Germany, the favelas in Rio de Janeiro, the townships of South Africa and a Burundi peace corps. Over the course of several decades, the team developed a treatment called Narrative Exposure Therapy and adapted it to the needs of young survivors of trauma and violence. Especially migrants who, as children or young adults, were exposed to terrorism and violence, for example as former child soldiers in war and crisis areas, go on to experience severe emotional and behavioural problems.

“Trauma-related psychological disorders are not typical anxiety disorders or anxiety conditioning, but rather a result of how the human mind organizes memory”, Thomas Elbert explains the particular approach of his work. Many young migrants experience such disorders as the result of the trauma they have experienced, in their homeland or during their flight to a new country. These manifest themselves as impulsiveness, mistrust, poor concentration, feelings of worthlessness, trauma-related symptoms and other problems. This makes it difficult for these young people to integrate into their new European surroundings successfully, since this task requires a high level of performance, cognitive and social skills. Humanitarian, societal and economic reasons alike require the treatment and prevention of the devastating consequences of these experiences. The therapies developed on the basis of Konstanz’s MemoTV research on stress and violence can serve to prevent or at least limit the negative effects of these traumatic experiences.

Thomas Elbert hopes his planned transfer project will result in a new therapeutic intervention that provides the greatest possible support for the mental health and healing of youth who have been traumatized and displaced by conflicts and war: “We want them to regain their occupational functionality, their social status as well as their autonomy over their decisions and futures”. In the first year, the project will be carried out by the Lake Constance Institute for
Psychotherapy (bip) at the University of Konstanz. The aim is to demonstrate a successful model that will be implemented across Europe.

In 2019, the European Science Council awarded Proof of Concept Grants to 54 projects. The renowned award, worth €150,000, supports the transfer of previously funded ERC research projects in the fields of society, politics and business. The grants are part of the EU’s research and innovation programme, Horizon 2020. Projects are selected from all scientific fields.

Key facts
- Konstanz neuropsychologist, Professor Thomas Elbert, and project partners receive ERC Proof of Concept Grant from the European Science Council to apply the results of research on trauma and violence from the MemoTV project
- Transfer project to develop training curriculum for mental health care tailored specifically to the challenges and needs of traumatized youth who arrive in the EU
- Team of researchers investigates the functional connections between human memory and trauma-related disorder using Narrative Exposure Therapy
- Model for therapy to be implemented first in Konstanz and the Lake Constance region and then across Europe
- Currently 54 Proof of Concept Projects funded by The European Research Council
- Further information:
  - https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narrative_Expositionstherapie
  - https://www.psychologie.uni-konstanz.de/bip-bodenseeinstitut-fuer-psychotherapie/
  - MemoTV
  - https://www.psychologie.uni-konstanz.de/typo3temp/secure_downloads/91990/0/05c0e0e77c85159f902ab5b2185ba3ffe1771827/MemoTV__Traumatische_Erfahrungen.pdf

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