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Survivors in their third decade after the North Sea oil rig disaster of 1980

Long-term perspectives on mental health

Thesis for the degree of Philosophiae Doctor

Trondheim, February 2011

Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Medicine
Department of Neuroscience



NTNU – Trondheim
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Norsk sammendrag

Overlevende 27 år etter Alexander L. Kielland ulykken i 1980 – deres psykiske helse i et langtidsperspektiv

Etter Alexander L. Kielland ulykken på Ekofisk feltet 27. mars 1980, der 123 mennesker mistet livet, ble det erklært landesorg. Hendelsen er fortsatt blant de største katastrofer som har rammet Norge i fredstid. Nasjonale markeringer er siden blitt avholdt jevnlig i Stavanger, senest 30 års markeringen i mars 2010. Av de 212 oljearbeiderne ombord da plattformen gikk rundt, berget 89 livet. Denne avhandlingen er del av et større forskningsprosjekt som har fulgt de 75 norske overlevende i nesten 30 år. Det er benyttet intervjuer og/eller spørreskjema i 1980, 1981, 1985 og sist i 2007. En sammenligningsgruppe med 92 nordsjøansatte ble inkludert fra 1985; de var ikke med i ulykken.

Hensikten med denne avhandlingen er å belyse utviklingen av stress plager og den psykiske helse over et tidsrom på nesten tre tiår. Sammenhengen mellom tidlige reaksjoner og senere utfall er særlig vektlagt. Videre er angivelse av positive livsendringer undersøkt.

Kielland-undersøkelsene har fått høy oppslutning på grunn av stor velvilje fra de overlevende og fra sammenligningsgruppa. Av de 57 oppsporbare og gjenlevende norske overlevende i 2007 deltok 51 i en eller flere deler av undersøkelsen. Data fra 70 ble benyttet i analysene av forløpet over tid. I 2007 deltok 62 av 78 mulige fra sammenligningsgruppa.

Arbeidet som her presenteres omfatter tre vitenskapelige artikler. De bygger særlig på standardiserte spørreskjema om ulike typer stressplager, psykisk helse, personlighet og posttraumatisk vekst. I tillegg ble informasjon om alder, sivilstatus, arbeidsforhold og eventuelle senere katastrofer eller ulykker tatt med.

I 1985 viste de overlevende betydelig mer tegn på stress og psykiske plager enn sammenligningsgruppa. I 2007 var forskjellene mindre, men samlet sett var det fortsatt noe mer stressplager hos de overlevende. Høyt og vedvarende nivå av stress de første ukene rett etter ulykka viste seg å gi mer stress plager etter fem og 27 år.

Den psykiske helsa varierte over tid. Etter sine ulike forløp kunne de overlevende deles i fire grupper. De fleste (61%) kan karakteriseres som motstandsdyktige eller resiliente. De hadde noe stress plager i starten, men de forsvant ganske raskt etter ulykka. Senere hadde de få psykiske plager. De tre andre gruppene hadde høye, vedvarende stress plager rett etter ulykka, men i de neste tre tiårene var forløpene deres nokså forskjellige. En gruppe fikk gradvis mindre psykiske vansker; de ble bedre og bedre med tiden (14%). En annen gruppe ble stadig verre med tilbakefall (13%). Den tredje gruppa hadde kroniske, varige plager (11%). Personligheten til den enkelte påvirket også utfallet.

De som i 2007 uttrykte at Kielland-ulykken hadde ført til positive livsendringer, altså posttraumatisk vekst, var samtidig også sterkt psykisk plaget.

Avhandlingen viser at selv om Alexander L. Kielland ulykken gjorde inntrykk på de fleste overlevende i tiden like etter, kom om lag to tredjedeler seg nokså raskt. For et mindretall, ca en fjerdedel, satte hendelsen dypere spor. Deres psykiske helse var enten preget av tilbakefall eller kroniske plager. For å forebygge negative følger etter sivile katastrofer eller ulykker kan tidlig kartlegging og vurdering av stress-plager i den første tiden gi en nyttig pekepinn om hvem som står i fare på lengre sikt.

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Also, I have greatly appreciated the sharing of ideas and thoughts about this work with Hans Jakob Bøe, clinical psychologist and my fellow Ph.D student in the project.

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Trondheim, September 2010

Katrine Høyner Holgersen

List of papers

Paper I:

Katrine Høyer Holgersen, Hans Jakob Bøe, Christian A. Klöckner, Lars Weisæth, Are Holen
Initial stress responses in relation to outcome after three decades
J Nerv Ment Dis 2010; 198(3):230-233.

Paper II:

Katrine Høyer Holgersen, Christian A. Klöckner, Hans Jakob Bøe, Lars Weisæth, Are Holen
Disaster survivors in their third decade – trajectories of initial stress responses and long-term course of mental health (*accepted for publication in J Trauma Stress; the submitted version in this dissertation has later been revised*)

Paper III:

Katrine Høyer Holgersen, Hans Jakob Bøe, Are Holen
Long-term perspectives on posttraumatic growth in disaster survivors
J Trauma Stress 2010; 23(3): 413-416.

Abbreviations and acronyms

ASD	Acute stress disorder
BIC	Bayesian information criteria
CES	Centrality of event scale
CFI	Comparative fit index
Cov	Covariation
DSM	Diagnostic statistical manual of mental disorders
FIML	Full information maximum likelihood
GHQ	General health questionnaire
GMM	Growth mixture modeling
ICD	International classification of diseases
IES	Impact of event scale
KZ syndrome	Concentration camp syndrome
LGM	Latent growth modeling
M	Mean
n.s.	Non-significant
NEO-FFI	NEO Five-factor inventory
NEO-PI-R	NEO Personality inventory – Revised
PTG	Posttraumatic growth
PTGI	Posttraumatic growth inventory
PTSD	Posttraumatic stress disorder
PTSS	Posttraumatic stress scale
RMSEA	Root mean square error of approximation
SD	Standars deviation
SE	Standard error
TLI	Tucker Lewis index
U	Mann Whitney U-test
B	Unstandardized beta
β	Standardized beta
α	Cronbach's alpha
r	Pearson's correlation coefficient
ρ	Spearman's rho
χ^2	Chi- square

Errata:

Paper 3: page 416, 1st column, line 12: J.P.W.B.Raphael (Ed.), should be J.P. Wilson & B. Raphael (Eds.)

Summary

Background and objective: In March 2010, a 30 years' memorial assembly related to one of Norway's worst disasters ever was held. The oil rig named after the Norwegian author, Alexander L. Kielland, capsized in the North Sea on the 27th March, 1980. Of the 212 men onboard, 89 survived. This doctoral thesis is a part of a larger longitudinal project which has been following-up the Norwegian survivors across four waves of data collections, in 1980, 1981, 1985 and 2007. A matched reference group of oil-rig workers from the same field, Ekofisk, was included in 1985. The objective of the present thesis was to study mental health outcomes after almost three decades of this civilian disaster.

Methods: Of the 75 Norwegian survivors in 1980, data sets from 70 were stored for the longitudinal analyses. In 2007, 57 survivors were still alive and traceable. Of these, 51 participated. Of the 92 men in the comparison group included in 1985, 62 took part in 2007. The study draws on self-reports collected at all four waves. Longitudinal measures covered posttraumatic stress (Impact of Event Scale; IES-15), general manifestations of stress (Posttraumatic Stress Scale; PTSS-10) as well as the detection of general mental health problems (General Health Questionnaire; GHQ-20). Included in the data collection of 2007 were a version of the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-28), a personality inventory (NEO Five Factor Inventory; NEO-FFI), and a measure of positive psychological changes (Posttraumatic Growth Inventory; PTGI). Demographic information was also included.

Results: Five years after the North Sea oil rig disaster, the survivors clearly reported more suffering than the comparison group. In 2007, however, the difference had faded. A tendency to report more stress symptoms was still found for the survivors. Moreover, high stress scores

in the very first days post disaster and a slow recovery during the initial weeks were both associated with long-term suffering.

When combining the initial recovery and the long-term course of mental health, four latent trajectories were identified: the resilient (61%), recovering (14%), chronic (11%), and relapsing (13%). The two thirds classified as resilient, showed a moderate starting point of stress. Subsequently, they had a rapid decline across the first eight weeks. Their long-term scores on mental health problems remained low. The trajectories of those in the recovery, chronic or relapse groups had initially high, stable stress scores, while their long-term course of mental health problems differed. A personality style with high scores on neuroticism was associated with the chronic and the relapsing trajectories.

Strong positive associations were found between reported posttraumatic growth and concurrent levels of posttraumatic stress 27 years post disaster. Weaker or no associations between growth and posttraumatic stress of the past were found. Decades after the disaster, general mental health problems coexisted with the higher levels of reported posttraumatic growth, but the associations were mediated by the concurrent posttraumatic symptoms.

Conclusions: Roughly two thirds of the survivors after the North-Sea oil rig disaster bounced back into adequate good mental health within the first two months. Another 14 % reported initial suffering, but recovered more slowly. Hence, in a long-term perspective three out of four remained mentally healthy. A minor part (24%) demonstrated chronic or relapsing courses of mental health problems. A high load of initial stress manifestations which did not decline during the first weeks, was associated with various patterns of suffering in the following three decades. Self-reports about posttraumatic growth after almost three decades did not indicate less mental suffering. Early screening may identify those who are at risk of long-term post-traumatic suffering.

Introduction

Adverse events and health

The interest in the human response to adverse or traumatic events has often been described to have its roots in the antique literature and philosophy as well as in the pioneers of medicine and psychology (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Monson, Friedman, & LaBash, 2007; van der Kolk, 2007; van der Kolk, Weisaeth, & van der Hart, 1997; Weisaeth, 2002). Three decades ago, the attention increased considerably both among researchers and clinicians after the introduction of Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a diagnosis in the DSM-III (American Psychiatric Association, 1980).

From the 1980s, the research oriented trauma literature has burgeoned (D. J. Stein et al., 2009). Today, several specialized journals are dedicated to the field, such as the “Journal of Traumatic Stress”, “Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice and Policy”, “Australasian Journal of Disaster and Trauma Studies”, “Traumatology, the International Journal” etc. Also, international and national research societies as well as resource centers for people exposed to trauma have been established around the world. In Norway, the National Centre for Violence and Traumatic Stress Studies was founded in 2004.

Within the field of traumatic stress studies, considerable knowledge has been derived from combat-related experiences. Wars tend to encompass reiterated trauma exposures. Their impact on health may last longer and be more pervasive than after a single traumatic event in civilian life such as in motor vehicle accidents and its likes. The study of abuse represents another major area of research. Scientific research on civil trauma represents a challenge to methodological rigorousness as the events often include just one or a few survivors. To draw conclusions from a sample of diverse accidents and contexts may be cumbersome as each

event varies considerably. An important alternative is to study conjointly the survivors of one disaster. Such populations are usually clearly defined by the particular event. Usually, the population is a selection of regular people. The scope of this thesis is the long-term follow-up of one civilian disaster; the North Sea oil rig disaster of 27th March, 1980.

A brief history of traumatic stress studies

Several publications have presented the early history of traumatic stress studies (e.g., Healy, 1993; Kinzie & Goetz, 1996; Monson, et al., 2007; van der Kolk, 2007; van der Kolk, et al., 1997; Weisaeth, 2002). Below, a brief summary is given.

In addition to the observations from the battlefields across time, the very early recognition of civilian events has been ascribed to the increasing occurrence of accidents during the industrial revolution (Caplan, 1995; Weisaeth, 2002). In historical overviews, the British surgeon Erichsen has been credited to have started the train of thoughts and observations related to posttraumatic stress. In the second half of the nineteenth century, he introduced the concept of the “railway spine” to describe the complaints after severe railway accidents (Erichsen, 1866). Some decades later, Page drew attention to how mental causes could explain the general shocks that often were seen, despite no bodily injuries (Page, 1883).

Works on how mental issues presumably influence the nervous system after trauma has amongst others been ascribed to Herman Oppenheim and Jean-Martin Charcot (e.g., Healy, 1993; Weisaeth, 2002). By the end of the 1880s, Pierre Janet’s work on dissociation and Sigmund Freud’s views of the unconsciousness, repression and fixation have been described to have brought the models of explanation further into the psychological realm (e.g., van der Kolk & van der Hart, 1989; Weisaeth, 2002). The repeated mental images of neurotic patients were the focus of concern, rather than the physical pathology or moral failing of the individual (Healy, 1993).

War experiences have brought out much of the knowledge that we today have about human responses to adverse events. Several designations have been applied to describe human horror from wars. “Shell shock” was used for soldiers of World War I suffering from nervous collapse and exhaustion (Myers, 1915). Additionally, “the irritable heart of soldiers”, “combat neurosis”, or “war neurosis” appeared in the times of war (e.g., Gersons & Carlier, 1992).

Abram Kardiner began his career treating traumatized U.S. World War I veterans. During World War II, he described the responses which closely resembled those of today’s PTSD (Monson, et al., 2007; van der Kolk, 2007). Included were increased feelings of irritability and outbursts of anger, auditory hypersensitivity, fixation on the trauma, disrupted personality functioning, and disturbed dreams (Kardiner, 1941). Observations of other categories of survivors from World War II, such as the concentration camp survivors (Eitinger, 1964) and the war sailors (Askevold, 1976/77) expanded the body of research.

The increased attention to posttraumatic responses in the 1980s has often been ascribed to the thousands of returning U.S. Vietnam veterans (Friedman, Resick, & Keane, 2007). In the 1970s, studies of civilian victims such as children and women also started to emerge (van der Kolk, et al., 1997). Leonore Terr demonstrated early the mental consequences for children as much as four years after a major trauma (1981, 1983). Goldine Gleaser, Bonnie Green, Carolyn Winget and their colleagues published the early studies on the survivors after the Buffalo Creek dam collapse (Gleser, Green, & Winget, 1981).

At about the same time, Mardi Horowitz’ ground breaking book on the stress response syndromes was published (Horowitz, 1976). In his work, he outlines the typical patterns of intrusive and avoidant mental processes often seen in traumatized persons. His work was a major forerunner on the North American continent to the diagnosis of posttraumatic stress of 1980.

Traumatic stress studies can still be seen as divided into those that focus on war and those that are targeting civilian events. Within the latter, disaster studies represent a specialized field.

Disaster studies – opportunities and challenges

A disaster has been defined as “a potentially traumatic event that is collectively experienced, has an acute onset, and is time-delimited; disasters may be attributed to natural, technological, or human causes” (McFarlane & Norris, 2006, p. 4). Even though Edvard Stierlins work from 1910/1911 often has been described as the first published disaster study (van der Kolk, et al., 1997), books on the topic did not appear until the late 1970s (Quarantelli, 1978; Raphael, 1986). The first textbook on disaster psychiatry appeared only recently (Ursano, 2007).

Disasters have always been a part of man’s existence; they occur time and again around the world. In the U.S. national representative study of mental health, 19% of the men and 15% of the women reported to have been exposed to a natural disaster such as fire or flood etc. For accidents, the exposure rate was 25% for men and 14% for women (Kessler, Sonnega, Bromet, Hughes, & Nelson, 1995). In a representative sample from Australia, those reporting involvement in natural disasters amounted to 20% for men and 13% for women. For life threatening accidents, the rates were 28 % and 14%, respectively (Creamer, Burgess, & McFarlane, 2001).

Disasters have been recognized to provide unique opportunities for studies of the effects on mental health after adverse events in a hale and hearty, randomly selected population (Raphael, 1986). Genetic influence on the occurrence of every-day life events such as marital incompatibility and work difficulties, financial problems or illnesses has been demonstrated (Plomin, 1994). In contrast, exposure to most disasters is not a direct consequence of personality. The importance of understanding major traumas is highly

acknowledged. Nevertheless, ethical committees would not allow experimental or laboratory testing of such events. Accordingly, researchers in the field depend on the study of survivors from naturalistic settings.

In terms of challenges, the unpredictability of such events represents one. Much of the disaster research has been motivated by a sense of urgency and concern (Norris, Galea, Friedman, & Watson, 2006). Rigorous research requirements are often hard to meet for neat and thorough planning of the desirable number of participants from power-estimations, and the careful development of suitable inventories. When disasters strike, the researcher has to draw on previous knowledge and experience. Accordingly, if the impact of major stress is to be studied, the settings have to be naturalistic, and the research paradigm must be different from those in the experimental designs (Holen, 1990).

As for trauma research in general, the interests in disasters have been growing in the last decades (Norris & Elrod, 2006). Several meta-analyses have concluded that such events have major implications for health (Katz, Pellegrino, Pandya, Ng, & DeLisi, 2002; Neria, Nandi, & Galea, 2008; Norris, Friedman, & Watson, 2002). The longitudinal effects of disasters, however, remains obscure. Carefully conceived studies exploring the long-term course of distress after disasters have been called for (Galea, Nandi, & Vlahov, 2005; Neria, et al., 2008; Norris, 2006; Norris, Friedman, & Watson, 2002).

Disaster research in Norway

In Norway, disaster studies have their origin in long traditions. In a review by Malt and Weisæth (1989), the focus on the effects of adverse events emerged in the first half of the 20th century, but the breakthrough has been ascribed to the international works on WW II concentration camp survivors by Leo Eitinger and Axel Støm (Eitinger, 1964; Eitinger & Strøm, 1973). Eitinger's interest in human responses to horror was deeply rooted in his personal, Jewish background. He was trained as a medical doctor in former Czechoslovakia.

In 1939, he fled to Norway, but he was deported to German concentration camps in 1943. Out of about 600 Jews from Norway, he was one of the less than 30 who returned after WW II. He continued his medical profession by specializing in psychiatry, and devoted much of his work to the health consequences of war, for those in the military as well as for those who were civilians and refugees (Sund, 2008). In his work on the long-term consequences of the concentration camps, higher mortality and morbidity was documented. Together with Axel Strøm, Eitinger continued the work with the KZ syndrome, building on a collection of symptoms already described in part in the early fifties by Danish researchers (Helweg-Larsen et al., 1952). A persistent cluster of symptoms was seen, which included fatigue, irritability, depressed mood, headache, restlessness, concentration and memory problems.

The war-sailor syndrome with a similar symptom cluster was later described among World War II sailors who had crossed the Atlantic Sea in convoys under constant threats of being torpedoed by the German submarines (Askevold, 1976/77; Egede-Nissen, 1978). Lasting effects on health from extreme and long-term stress was again demonstrated. Both the KZ syndrome and the later war-sailor syndrome were European forerunners to the diagnosis of PTSD.

The development of traumatic stress studies was facilitated by the establishment of the world's first Chair of Disaster Psychiatry (Malt & Weisaeth, 1989). This was made possible by the collaboration between the Joint Norwegian Armed Forces and the University of Oslo. Arne Sund was the Chief Psychiatrist of the Royal Norwegian Forces. He was also the first professor in Disaster psychiatry. Like Eitinger, Sund had personal war experiences which may have instigated his subsequent interest in psychological trauma. Serving as a medical doctor and surgeon in the Korean war, he was directly exposed to human atrocities. In his later work, he initiated the study of survivors from civilian disasters in Norway (Sund, 2008).

Under his supervision, three doctoral dissertations targeted civilians' responses to adverse events. The contexts were after an industrial disaster (Weisæth, 1984), after motor vehicle accidents (Malt, 1987), and after the North Sea oil-rig disaster (Holen, 1990). Related works were published in international journals and books (Holen, 1991; Malt, 1988; Malt, Blikra, & Hoivik, 1989; Malt & Ugland, 1989; Weisaeth, 1989a, 1989b, 2001).

This thesis, and the parallel thesis by Hans Jakob Bøe, are both based on the very long-term follow-up studies of the survivors from the capsized oil-rig in the North Sea.

In Bergen, the Center for Crisis Psychology was founded in 1988. Its activities includes clinical research, educational activities and research on the impact of stressful events; disaster-related work has also been published (e.g., Dyregrov, Frykholm, Lilled, Broberg, & Holmberg, 2003; Dyregrov & Gjestad, 2003). Moreover, at the University of Bergen, the Trauma Psychology Research Group followed survivors from a bus accident in Western Norway after one, three, five, ten and 20 years (e.g., Winje, 1996; Winje & Ulvik, 1998). The Operational Psychology and Forensic Research Group has also published disaster related studies (e.g., Eid, Johnsen, & Saus, 2005; Eid, Johnsen, & Thayer, 2001; Johnsen, Eid, Lovstad, & Michelsen, 1997).

In 2004, the National Centre for Violence and Traumatic Stress Studies (Nasjonalt kunskapscenter om vold og traumatisk stress; NKVTS) was established in Oslo. The centre is currently running several research projects. Some target disasters, and recently, studies on the tsunami in South Asia (2004) have been carried out (e.g., Hafstad, Gil-Rivas, Kilmer, & Raeder, 2010; Heir, Piatigorsky, & Weisaeth, 2009; Hussain, Weisaeth, & Heir, 2010a, 2010b; Jensen, Dyb, & Nygaard, 2009; Kristensen, Weisaeth, & Heir, 2009; Thoresen, Tonnessen, Lindgaard, Andreassen, & Weisaeth, 2009), also in collaboration with the Swedish National Centre for Disaster Psychiatry at Uppsala University (e.g., Bergh

Johannesson, Lundin, Hultman, Lindam, Dyster-Aas, Arnberg, & Michel, 2009; Heir, Rosendal, Bergh Johannesson, Michel, Mortensen, Weisaeth, Andersen, & Hultman 2010).

To conclude: Disaster studies have had long traditions and deep roots in Norway. The studies in Norway on traumatic stress are still prolific, and they are likely to be continued by new generations of researchers.

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) has in general been studied as a possible negative outcome of trauma, and of disasters in particular (Norris, Friedman, & Watson, 2002). The inclusion of PTSD in the diagnostic manual in 1980 provided a new option to classify chronic conditions in people who had developed long-term symptoms after major traumatic events (Yehuda & McFarlane, 1995). A stressor criterion, or the A criterion, is the gate keeper for defining who may fulfill the criteria for the diagnosis. In the current version of the DSM, the stressor is defined: “The person experienced, witnessed or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others. The person's response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror” (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

Moreover, seventeen items from three symptom clusters are defined in terms of their connection to the A criterion, and they include: 1) Re-experience or intrusions of the trauma (B-criteria), at least one of five symptoms is required; 2) Avoidance and numbing (C-criteria), three of seven criteria are currently required; 3) Hyperarousal (D-criteria), two of five symptoms are required. The disturbance has to last more than one month (E-criteria). The symptoms should have elicited significant clinical distress or impaired the patient's social and/or occupational life or functioning (F-criteria) (DSM-IV; American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

Several studies have demonstrated that the prevalence of PTSD in a population is much lower than the frequency of exposures to traumatic events. Some selected studies are presented in table 1 .

Table 1. Comparing prevalence of exposure to trauma in relation to prevalence of posttraumatic stress disorder in some epidemiological studies

Author (Year)	N	Country	Lifetime Exposure		Prevalence PTSD	
			Men	Women	Men	Women
Kessler et.al (1995; 1999)	5877	USA	60.7%	51.2%	5.0% ^a 3.9% ^{b1}	10.4% ^a 3.9% ^{b1}
Craemer et.al (2001)	10641	Australia	64.5%	49.5%	1.2% ^b	1.4% ^b
Hapke et.al (2006)	4075	Germany	19.5%	20.0%	0.6% ^a 0.3% ^b	2.2% ^a 1.1% ^b
Stein et.al (1997)	1002	Canada	81.3%	74.2%	1.2% ^c	2.7% ^c

a: lifetime prevalence

b: 12-months prevalence

c: 1 month prevalence

¹ : mean of total sample

The studies differ in the ways the prevalence of PTSD is reported, of a lifetime, during the last year, or currently. Solid comparisons are limited (Creamer, et al., 2001). Nevertheless, the tentative conclusions are firstly that exposure to trauma is quite common. Secondly, that exposure does not inevitably lead to the development of PTSD.

Diversity of posttraumatic stress responses

In the aftermath of trauma, posttraumatic suffering may go beyond the full-blown diagnosis of PTSD. Frequently, comorbidity is found with diagnoses such as depression, anxiety or substance abuse (Kessler, et al., 1995). “Partial” or “subthreshold” PTSD has also been often used in describing victims who are affected by debilitating symptoms, but who fail to meet the full diagnostic criteria of the disorder (Grubaugh et al., 2005; Mylle & Maes,

2004). A Canadian prevalence study found that the 1-month prevalence of partial PTSD did not differ essentially from that of the full-blown PTSD; 3.4% versus 2.7% for women, and 0.3% versus 1.2% for men (M. B. Stein, et al., 1997).

The debilitating effects on health and function with subthreshold PTSD have been widely debated (Amaya-Jackson et al., 1999). Recent studies have shown fairly equal rates of disability and comorbidity between those fulfilling the criteria and those with a partial PTSD (Jeon et al., 2007; van Zelst, de Beurs, Beekman, van Dyck, & Deeg, 2006). Accordingly, the current diagnostic DSM-criteria may be too limited to capture the relevant diversity of the psychopathology after trauma.

Moreover, the development of chronic posttraumatic stress has been described to involve several stages. Initially, the distress is relatively restricted to specific stress symptoms. Thereafter, severe disability may follow, including mental and somatic comorbidities (Davidson, 2001; Yehuda & McFarlane, 1995). In the long-term perspective, wide-ranging mental health consequences have been demonstrated after combat (Solomon, Shklar, Singer, & Mikulincer, 2006). Similar problems were reflected in this sample in 1985 (Holen, 1990), and likewise, in the 10- year follow-up study of the Piper Alpha disaster (Hull, Alexander, & Klein, 2002).

A certain overlap between the scales targeting various aspects of mental health is to be expected. To capture the diversity of the posttraumatic psychopathology, a broad approach to the study of the ensuing mental health problems seems warranted.

Long-term impact of exposure to disaster

Reports on the very long-term effects of exposure to disasters are rare. In the most extensive disaster review so far, only 15% (n = 33) of 225 studies had a follow-up that covered more than one year post-disaster (Norris, 2006; Norris, Friedman, & Watson, 2002). Meta-reviews have concluded that posttraumatic stress among survivors usually declined

rapidly during that first year, but for some, the symptoms persisted (Neria, et al., 2008; Norris et al., 2002).

In research on combat related stress, lasting effects have been shown (Levy & Sidel, 2009) and in epidemiological trauma studies, PTSD did not remit in more than slightly one third of the cases (Kessler, et al., 1995). Suffering over decades is well-documented for war veterans (e.g., Dirkzwager, Bramsen, & van der Ploeg, 2001), for prisoners of war (e.g., Solomon & Dekel, 2005), and for Holocaust survivors (e.g., Amir & Lev-Wiesel, 2003).

As for disasters, longitudinal follow-up studies have showed that some survivors report distress even after a very long time. Posttraumatic problems were reported by 44% two years after the Buffalo Creek Dam collapse, and 28% reported similar distress 14 years later (Green et al., 1990). In the 25-year follow-up study of the Borås hotel-fire in Sweden, two thirds reported suffering two years after, and one fifth did so after ten years. In the latest data collection, approximately 10% reported suffering of posttraumatic stress, while 21% reported that the event still had an impact on their daily lives (Lundin & Jansson, 2007).

Twenty years after childhood exposure to a bushfire, a recent study found only a small direct difference between the frequencies of mental health diagnoses between the survivors and a control group. Nevertheless, 75% of the victims reported some degree of distress in relation to the bushfire (McFarlane & Van Hooff, 2009).

In retrospective studies carried out just once in the wake of disasters, lasting impact on people's lives and well-being has been found. In a ten year follow-up of survivors from the Piper Alpha oil rig disaster, 21% fulfilled the diagnostic criteria for PTSD (Hull, et al., 2002). In a 33-year follow-up of the children from the Aberfan disaster in 1966 in which a coal slag heap collapsed on to a school, 29% were found to suffer from current PTSD (Morgan, Scourfield, Williams, Jasper, & Lewis, 2003). In a 36-year follow-up of survivors from a dam

collapse, the rate of current PTSD was 21% (Favaro, Zatta, Colombo, & Santonastaso, 2004).

While the studies mentioned above all found the prevalence of lasting suffering to range from 20 to 30%, a study of Greek earthquake survivors found a much higher proportion; fifty years later, most survivors (78%) reported that the natural disaster had a current strong influence upon their lives (Lazaratou et al., 2008).

Long-term studies involving repeated measures of distress in disaster survivors, and in combination with a matched comparison group, are rarely found. Accordingly, the knowledge about the very long lasting effects of single disasters still remains obscure.

Risk factors

Why do some people recover from traumatic events, while others experience lasting posttraumatic suffering? Risk-factors have been extensively studied, but the picture is ambiguous (Brewin, Andrews, & Valentine, 2000; Ozer, Best, Lipsey, & Weiss, 2003).

In an often cited study by Brewin and colleagues (2000), three risk factors remained uniform across studies; i.e., psychiatric history, childhood abuse and family history. Neuroticism as a personality trait is closely linked to most psychiatric conditions (Costa & McCrae, 1992a). Retrospective studies have called attention to neuroticism as a possible vulnerability factor for the development of PTSD (Fauerbach, Lawrence, Schmidt, Munster, & Costa, 2000; Holeva & Tarrier, 2001; McFarlane, 1988a; Talbert, Braswell, Albrecht, Hyer, & Boudewyns, 1993). Further underpinning for neuroticism as a risk factor has been given through the findings of a national representative U.S sample (Cox, MacPherson, Enns, & McWilliams, 2004) and also, from prospective studies (Engelhard & van den Hout, 2007; Engelhard, van den Hout, & Schouten, 2006).

In another review, the strongest risk factors were related to the immediate or early stress responses (Ozer, et al., 2003). The inclusion of the diagnosis, Acute Stress Disorder

(ASD) in DSM-IV was an effort to capture the early stress responses, but also a way to identify those who may develop PTSD (Cardena et al., 1998; Harvey & Bryant, 2002). Mixed findings have been made about the predictive value of early responses for later PTSD. While a recent study found that the majority of those developing PTSD did not initially meet the criteria of ASD (Bryant, Creamer, O'Donnell, Silove, & McFarlane, 2008), a review of longitudinal studies concluded that the acute symptoms turned out as a risk factor (Peleg & Shalev, 2006). When it comes to the very long-term predictions from the early stress responses, combat experiences in a 50-year prospective study predicted the symptoms of PTSD (Lee, Vaillant, Torrey, & Elder, 1995). Moreover, links to later outcomes in terms of posttraumatic symptoms and general social functioning were found twenty years later among combat veterans from the Lebanon war (Solomon & Mikulincer, 2006; Solomon, et al., 2006).

Most studies on how early responses may predict later outcome have used a single measure point to cover the initial levels of stress. Norris and colleagues (2003) demonstrated how early recovery, or change over time, worked as a buffer. After at least one year, the group with stable, severe initial stress manifestations had more PTSD symptoms than the group with severe, but transient early reactions. Taking aspects of change or recovery into account, may add to the general understanding of the temporal relationship of early responses and later outcomes.

From end-points to trajectories of change

A shift from single endpoints as the main outcome to trajectories of change over time has recently been noted in the trauma field (Peleg & Shalev, 2006). Already in the late 1980s, eight different paths of posttraumatic morbidity were demonstrated by McFarlane (1988b) when studying firefighters in the long-term. In the early 1990s, Blank suggested to distinguish between the course of PTSD as being acute, delayed, chronic, intermittent and recurrent (1993).

By new developments in the methodology for studies of change, the longitudinal research has been enriched (Singer & Willett, 2003). Analyses of individual trajectories have been noted as particularly useful in trauma research (King, King, Salgado, & Shalev, 2003; Norris, 2006). In contrast to many other arenas within the mental health field, distress precipitated by a major trauma has a clear and traceable onset. The trajectory of distress after a disaster is usually obtainable. By the latent growth modeling (LGM), the individual's change over time is estimated. The approximations may be used for the prediction of the outcome.

Within this framework, O'Donnell et al., (2007) showed that those with and without PTSD after one year had different routes of recovery. By applying latent growth modeling, Murphy et al., (2003) showed that the decline in PTSD symptoms over five years after parents' loss of their children was predicted by the parents' gender and their perceived social support.

By also including the latent categorical classes into the growth modeling, the approach of Growth Mixture Modeling (GMM) is an alternative to LGM. Unlike traditional latent growth modeling which attempts to fit one growth curve to the entire sample, the goal of the growth mixture modeling is to identify various possible latent classes. The classes would then have different and specific growth curves or trajectories (B. Muthén, 2001). The number of latent classes is determined by comparing the relative fit of the models with an increasing number of classes.

Over six years after the return of the veterans from the Gulf-war, Orcutt and colleagues (2004) identified a resilient and a chronic pathway in the posttraumatic symptoms by comparing individual trajectories of change. A similar distinction was found in a recent study in which heavy traumatized children were followed over three years (Nugent et al., 2009). By emphasizing that bouncing back seems to be the most common response to trauma,

Bonanno (2004) divided the prototypical patterns of disruption after a traumatic event into four patterns. He named them as chronic, delayed, recovery and resilience. The four trajectories were lately demonstrated by following a sample exposed to traumatic injuries over six months (deRoon-Cassini, Mancini, Rusch, & Bonanno, 2010).

A study targeting the trajectories after single disasters in two different samples, also demonstrated similar patterns (Norris, Tracy, & Galea, 2009). Both after the 11th September 2001 and after the Mexico floods in 1999 resistance, resilience, recovery and chronic dysfunction were found across the first 2 ½ and 2 years, respectively. Among terror victims, an additional delayed course was detected. Of recent, the interest in resilient trajectories has increased, as it turns out that most people exposed to traumatic events cope well (Bonanno, 2004; Bonanno, Galea, Bucciarelli, & Vlahov, 2006). Trajectories across several decades after a civilian disaster have so far not been demonstrated.

Resilience and trauma

In the 1970s and 1980s, resilience was discussed in developmental psychopathology in relation to protective factors seen in some children exposed to unfavourable life circumstances (Garmezy, 1971; Rutter, 1985). Later, the concept has gained attention also in traumatic stress studies (Bonanno, 2004; Bonanno, et al., 2006; Layne, Warren, Watson, & Shalev, 2007). A much used definition of adult resilience was given by Bonanno (2004, p. 20): “the ability of adults in otherwise normal circumstances who are exposed to an isolated and potentially highly disruptive event, such as the death of a close relation or a violent or life-threatening situation, to maintain relatively stable, healthy levels of psychological and physical functioning”.

According to Bonanno, the drop of normal functioning displayed by the trajectories of resilience will be short (weeks), and it is considerably different from the recovery trajectories which showed poor functioning over months, or even years. Resilience is characterized by

just a transient absence of the normal functioning; the overall stability is maintained.

Furthermore, resilience is to be distinguished from resistance, which refers to a trajectory absent of mental distress (Bonanno, 2004; Layne, et al., 2007). The recognition of resilience has implications both on the individual as well on the community level. In the aftermath of adverse events, it is important to emphasize resilience to the public rather than victimhood to foster recovery (Wessely, 2005).

Posttraumatic growth

While resilience refers to the capacity to bounce back to normal, other recent theoretical constructs have searched for thrive and positive changes after trauma. By introducing posttraumatic growth or PTG (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) and parallel concepts such as stress-related growth (Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996), and benefit-finding (Affleck & Tennen, 1996), the objective was to capture quantitatively positive outcomes. PTG has been defined as a “positive psychological change experienced as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, p. 1). The notion of posttraumatic growth has roots in ancient literature, religion and philosophy, as well as in the early scholars of psychology (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006).

PTG has been widely debated and a body of research on PTG has been emerging (Helgeson, Reynolds, & Tomich, 2006; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006). Exploration of the concept is still in its primary stages, and several questions about its nature remain unresolved (Hobfoll et al., 2007; Maercker & Zoellner, 2004; Park, 2004; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006; Wortman, 2004). One controversy deals with whether PTG relates to mental health problems (Park & Helgeson, 2006). Negative, positive, as well as no relationship between stress symptoms and PTG have been demonstrated (Helgeson, et al., 2006).

In the initial theory, the argument was that a minimum of stress had to be present in order to initiate the cognitive restructuring assumed to bring about posttraumatic growth

(Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 1998). Accordingly, preliminary co-existence of stress symptoms and PTG would not come as a surprise (Janoff-Bulman, 2004). PTG is not identical to an increase in well-being, or a decrease in distress. Rather, the presence of PTG may imply fuller and richer lives in the survivors (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Others have opposed this view. Some have argued that PTG should affect the person's mental health in positive ways (Zoellner & Maercker, 2006). The two-component, or Janus-Face model of PTG, tries to reconcile the opposing views by suggesting a double aspect by including both a constructive as well as a dysfunctional side to explain self-perceived posttraumatic growth (Maercker & Zoellner, 2004). The constructive side is in line with the original PTG theory, signifying positive changes. A dysfunctional side is also included; PTG may represent distortions counterbalancing emotional distress. Others have pointed to the power of illusions helping traumatized persons to comfort themselves from the misery of their traumatized lives (Taylor & Brown, 1988; Taylor, Kemeny, Reed, Bower, & Gruenewald, 2000). In this view, posttraumatic growth can be seen as a compensatory strategy (Levine, Laufer, Stein, Hamama-Raz, & Solomon, 2009; McFarland & Alvaro, 2000; Wortman, 2004; Znoj, 2006).

Varying time frames have been suggested to explain the diversity found. The relationship between PTG and well-being has more often been positive when two years or more have passed (Helgeson, et al., 2006). Some long-term expressions of growth and mental health have been demonstrated (Forstmeier, Kuwert, Spitzer, Freyberger, & Maercker, 2009; Lev-Wiesel & Amir, 2003; Maercker & Herrle, 2003; Solomon & Dekel, 2007). These studies have not included measures close to the event. The longitudinal project on the survivors from the North Sea oil rig disaster across almost three decades may add new insight to the long-term aspects of posttraumatic growth.

North Sea oil rig disaster – 27th March 1980

The present study is part of a larger long-term investigation of the survivors from the North Sea oil rig disaster of 27th March, 1980. The floating rig, named after the Norwegian author, Alexander L. Kielland (1849 -1906), was located on the Ekofisk field, halfway between Norway and the United Kingdom.

That afternoon in late March, the weather conditions were extremely bad. The winds were strong; 20 m/s which amount to a near gale. The waves were of 6-8 meters high. The water temperature was 4°C. The clear sight was limited to approximately 30 meters. Helicopters would normally not operate under such conditions due to the density of the fog. Around 6:30 P.M., a loud rumble was heard as one of the five legs broke off. The rig immediately tilted to an angle of 30°. The anchors on the opposite side kept the rig temporary stable. However, electricity onboard broke down and water poured in. The situation was chaotic. About forty minutes later, the angle had gradually reached 45° when the anchor wires broke. The rig capsized immediately; in less than a minute it was floating upside down with only the remaining four pontoons visible on the surface (Enghaug & Lønning, 1980; Holen, Sund, & Weisæth, 1983).

Rescue work was very difficult. Of the 212 men onboard, the minority of 89 survived. All had been directly exposed to a major trauma. They survived either by swimming over to the neighboring Edda rig, or by entering rafts or lifeboats, by being picked up from the sea by helicopters or supply vessels. Seventy-five of the survivors were registered with domicile in Norway. They have later been followed-up by this larger research project through four waves of data collections, in 1980, 1981, 1985 and 2007. The remaining 14 survivors were from UK, Spain, Portugal and Finland. They were excluded from the study to avoid problems related to cultural and language differences.

The first wave of data collection after the North Sea oil rig disaster was carried out in the months immediately after the disaster in 1980. Included were interviews and the completion of questionnaires. The second wave consisted of a mail survey after approximately 14 months. The third data collection was carried out about five years after the disaster; included were in-depth interviews, surveys in addition to the collection of social welfare data. Results from the three earliest data collections have been published elsewhere (Holen, 1991, 1993; Holen, et al., 1983).

The findings after the data collection in 1985 could be separated into three outcomes: one relating to the survivors' subjective appraisal of distress, one related to their occupational dysfunction, and one was related to the duration of their long-term sick-leaves after the event. The disaster experience itself, and also, the patterns of high alcohol consumption were significant predictors in all three outcomes. In addition, personality features conceptually related to neuroticism explained the outcome related to subjective reports on stress. Job stress, social support and background factors such as problems in childhood and a history of psychological suffering explained occupational dysfunction (Holen, 1990). The sick-leaves were far more common among the survivors on diagnoses subsumed under the three group labels "psychiatric", "psychosomatic" and "causalities" when contrasted with the comparison group (Holen, 1991). To summarize, major differences were found between the survivors and the matched comparison group after five years.

The last wave of data collection was organized in 2007 and consisted of semi-structured interviews, mostly over the phone, surveys and social welfare data. The papers of this thesis draws information from the self-reports made at all four points in time from 1980 to 2007, and also, from the demographic information, as well as the detections of later trauma.

General aim of thesis

The general aim of this thesis was to explore aspects of the long-term outcomes in mental health among survivors of the North Sea oil rig disaster of 1980.

Specific research questions addressed in this dissertation

In paper I:

- Will differences in stress levels disappear in the very long run between disaster survivors and those unexposed to disaster?
- Can the initial levels of stress responses and the early recovery within the first weeks post trauma predict the levels of distress in the very long-term?

In paper II:

- Will differences in general mental health disappear in the very long run between survivors and the comparison group?
- Can trajectories related to early recovery and long-term mental health be identified across decades?

In paper III:

- Will posttraumatic growth reported after almost three decades relate to the very early and later levels of posttraumatic stress, and also, to the general level of mental health?

Methods

Design, procedure and participants

Design and procedure

This disaster study has a naturalistic, longitudinal design of prospective long-term outcomes. The survivor population has been followed-up across almost three decades, in 1980, 1981, 1985 and 2007. The comparison group was included in the last two waves.

In 2005, all survivors (n = 61) and comparisons (n = 78) still alive and traceable were asked for written consent of continued use of the already collected data from the past. In addition, they were asked to take part in the next study. The fourth study, conducted in 2007¹ consisted of three parts: an extensive, in-depth telephone interview; a survey to be returned by mail; and the collection of health insurance data.

Participants

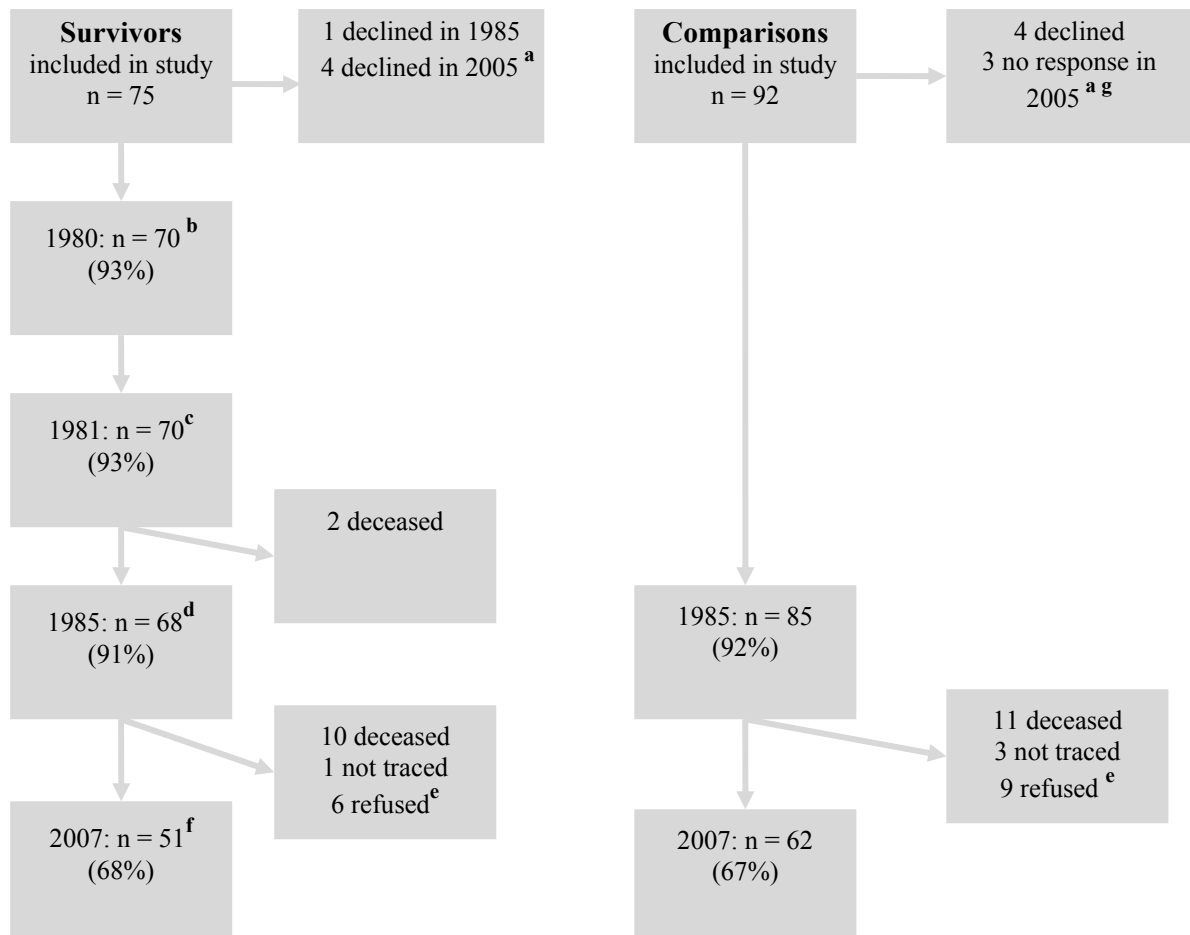
Of the 75 Norwegian survivors included in 1980, 51 (68.0%) participated in one or several parts of the study in 2007. Of the 92 men included in the comparison group in 1985, 62 (67.4 %) took part in the latest data collection. See figure 1 for a flowchart of participation across the four data collections.

Demographic information was collected from the survivors only, by personal interviews in 1980, and in 1985 it was done both for the survivors and the comparison groups. In 2007, it was done by telephone². In table 2, an overview is given of the main psychosocial data from the survivors at the time of the disaster. Also, this information is covered at the five and 27-years follow-up studies for both the survivors and the comparison group.

¹ two men in the comparison group were not contacted until 2009 due to confusion with the names list

² Five men were again interviewed personal, in accordance with their wishes

Figure 1. Flowchart of all survivors from 1980 to 2007 and the comparison group from 1985



a: in 2005, when all participants still alive were approached for renewed consent, and also, asked to take part in next data collection

b: n = 3 had missing on some parts of self-report

c: n = 1: completed only a few questions in 1981, accepted to be contacted and participated in the 1985-interview

d: n = 3: did not complete the self-report, but other parts of study

e: refused participation in all parts of 2007- study

f: n = 45 completed all parts (i.e., SR=self report, I = interview, SW= social welfare data); n = 1: I+ SW, n = 1 SW + partly I (due to illness), n = 1: SW + partly I+ partly SR (due to age), n = 1 SW, n = 1: SW + SR, n = 1: SW + I + partly SR (n = 46 completed all self-reports in 2007, n = 48 completed some self-reports in 2007)

g: data from the non-responders were deleted in accordance with the request from the ethical committee

Table 2. Age, marital and work status of survivors at the time of disaster in 1980, and of survivors and members of the comparison group at the follow-up in 1985 and 2007

Year		Time of accident	Long-term follow-up			
		1980	1985	2007		
		Survivors N = 70 ^{a)}	Survivors N = 68	Comparisons N = 85	Survivors N = 51 ^{c)}	Comparisons N = 62
Age		34.7 (9.3)	39.6 (9.0)	39.6 (8.5)	59.7 (7.4)	59.9 (6.8)
Marital status	Married/ Cohabitant	63 (90.0%) ^{b)}	56 (82.4%)	76 (89.4%)	38 (74.5%)	48 (77.4%)
	Single	4 (5.7%)	5 (7.4%)	6 (7.1%)	2 (3.9%)	1 (1.6%)
	Divorced	1 (1.4%)	7 (10.3%)	3 (3.5%)	7 (13.7%)	9 (14.5%)
	Widower	1 (1.4%)	0	0	2 (3.9%)	4 (6.5%)
Work status	Employed	70 (100%)	55 (80.9%)	85 (100%)	25 (49.0%)	34 (54.8%)
	Unemployed	0	4 (5.9%)	0	0	0
	Retired	0	0	0	10 (19.6%)	16 (25.8%)
	Disablement/ Sickleave	0	9 (13.2%)	0	14 (27.4%)	12 (19.4%)

a): n= 69 for marital status; one person did not participate in the interview

b): of these, 4 were in stable relationships/engagements

c): n = 49 for marital and employment status; two persons did not participate in the interviews

Measures

Targeting mental health

Posttraumatic Stress Scale (PTSS-10)

The level of immediate stress responses was measured by the Post-Traumatic Stress Scale, a self-report inventory (Holen, et al., 1983). PTSS was used several times to detect the levels of stress at the subsequent data collections. The questionnaire was originally developed from a large pool of items endorsed by the survivors in 1980, and again in 1981. Single items were included which significantly distinguished between those with mental health problems

and those without. A 10-item and a 12-item (Holen, 1990) version exist. PTSS had originally a dichotomous scoring option, i.e., 1 - yes or 0 - no. Later, a Likert-scale from 1 to 7 was introduced (Weisæth & Mehlum, 1993). At times, the scale has been referred to as the Post-Traumatic Symptom Scale, but as the items rather deal with manifestations of stress than symptoms of a diagnostic entity, the designation Posttraumatic Stress Scale has been preferred. Psychometric evaluations of the PTSS with the Likert response option have been carried out in Norwegian samples (Eid, Thayer, & Johnsen, 1999).

The 10-item version with the dichotomous scoring was used at all measure points of this study. Accordingly, the following ten stress manifestations were included: sleep difficulties, nightmares, depressed mood, startle reactions, tendency to withdraw, irritability, unstable mood, bad conscience, fear of reminders, and tensions in the body. In 1980, a retrospective post-trauma rating of the duration of each manifestation was made. For the scoring, six time frames were given: 1-3 days, 4-7 days, 2 weeks, 3 weeks, 4 weeks, 8 weeks or more. To allow growth modeling each item was coded in a dichotomous way for the six time points. If an item was endorsed to have lasted three weeks, the scoring on that time points was: 1-1-1-1-0-0. Accordingly, six total sum scores, each with a possible range from zero to ten were obtained from the initial positive endorsements from the six measure points. Cronbach's alphas for the total scores at the six time points were in 1980: $\alpha_{(n=69)} = .61, .64, .71, .76, .76$ and $.77^3$.

The PTSS does not presuppose exposure to a major stressor. Thus, comparisons with the unexposed oil-rig workers were possible. In 1985, the Cronbachs alphas were: $\alpha_{(n=65)} = .86$ for the survivors and $\alpha_{(n=85)} = .67$ for the comparison group. In 2007, the values were respectively: $\alpha_{(n=47)} = .89$ and $\alpha_{(n=62)} = .88$.

³ The participation rate in the three manuscripts this thesis is based on differ. Cronbachs alphas may therefore diverge slightly between the manuscripts. The exact numbers of participants used in each computation are given in brackets.

Impact of Event Scale (IES-15)

The Impact of Event Scale (IES-15; Horowitz, Wilner, & Alvarez, 1979) has been extensively used to detect posttraumatic stress (Sundin & Horowitz, 2003). Although, the IES does not directly diagnose PTSD, the scale has demonstrated to be a valid and a reliable self-report measure of psychological stress responses (Joseph, 2000; Sundin & Horowitz, 2002). The scale has 15 statements and includes seven Intrusion and eight Avoidance items. Contrary to the PTSS, and the later IES-22 (Weiss & Marmar, 1997), no items are targeting hyperarousal in the 15-item version.

The IES-22 was included in the latest data collection (2007), while IES-15 was consistently used at all four waves of the study, i.e., in 1980, 1981, 1985 and 2007. Therefore, the 15-item version was chosen for the longitudinal design. Participants were asked to indicate to which degree the North Sea oil rig disaster had impacted them during the last week prior to each data collection. On all four waves, responses were indicated on a Likert scale from 0 - "Not at all" to 5 - "To a very high degree".

The following Cronbach's alphas were obtained for the scales of Intrusion and Avoidance across the four waves: 1980_(n=45); I: .93, A: .88; 1981_(n=45); I: .92, A: .85; 1985_(n=44); I: .95, A: .89; and 2007_(n=46); I: .96, A: .91. The correlation coefficients between Intrusion and Avoidance scales were: 1980: .69; 1981: .69; 1985: .59; and 2007: .82. Due to the high inter correlations between the two subscales, the total IES was used in this study. The alphas for the four total scores were respectively: .94, .93, .95 and .95.

General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-20 and GHQ-28)

The General Health Questionnaire (Goldberg, 1972; Goldberg & Williams, 1988) was employed to capture the general mental health across the 27 years. Paper II applied the 20-item version used in 1980, 1981, 1985 and 2007.

The combination of PTSS and GHQ-20 in paper II was chosen in order to widen the knowledge derived from paper I. The overlap between the measures of specific stress (PTSS) and the general mental health by the GHQ-20 after 27 years was fairly high and as expected ($\rho_{(n=46)} = .69$). On the content level, however, one may argue that the two measures target rather different aspects of distress.

The 0-0-1-1 scoring was used, giving a potential range of the total sum score from zero to 20. Cronbach's alphas for the survivors were: 1980_(n=67): .94, 1981_(n=69): .85, 1985_(n=65): .95, and 2007_(n=46): .95. For the comparison group, the alphas were: 1985_(n=85): .86 and in 2007_(n=62): .71.

In paper III, the 28-item version of GHQ included only in 2007 was applied (Goldberg & Hillier, 1979). Seven items targeted four scales each: Somatization, Anxiety related phenomena, Social dysfunction, and Depression. The Likert method (0-1-2-3) of scoring was chosen. This is recommended for symptom intensity, rather than psychiatric caseness scoring (0-0-1-1); a wider distribution is thereby obtained (Goldberg et al., 1997). For each subscale, the potential score went from 0 to 21. Cronbach's alphas of the four GHQ-28 subscales (n = 46) had the respective values: .87, .89, .91 and .86.

Miscellaneous measures

Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI)

The Post Traumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) is one of the most widely used questionnaires to capture positive changes after trauma. The self-report scale has 21-items covering five subscales: Relating to others (7 items), New possibilities (5 items), Personal strength (4 items), Spiritual change (2 items), and Appreciation of life (3 items). The total sum is also used. In the original study, PTGI showed satisfactory internal consistencies for the total score of the 21 items ($\alpha = 0.90$), as well as for each of the five

subscales; their alphas ranged from 0.67 - 0.85. Also, the original test-retest reliability over two months was fairly good ($r = 0.71$).

PTGI was administered to the participants 27 years after the disaster. Permission to develop a Norwegian translation was obtained from the authors. The questionnaire was translated, then back-translated by a native English speaker, which resulted in minor changes in the Norwegian edition. The participants were asked to indicate on a Likert scale to which degree they had experienced the stated positive changes after the North Sea oil rig disaster. The response options were 0 - "I did not experience this change as a result of my crisis" to 5 - "I experienced this change to a very great degree as a result of my crisis".

Cronbach's alpha of the Norwegian total PTGI score was .95 in 2007 ($n = 46$).

NEO-Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI)

In 2007, to capture aspects of the personality, the Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI) was applied. This short version of the NEO PI-R consists of 60 items, targeting the five dimensions of personality: Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness (Costa & McCrae, 1992b). Items are rated on a Likert scale from 0 - "Very unlike me" to 4 - "Very like me". The questionnaire has been thoroughly validated, also for the Norwegian population (Martinsen, Nordvik, & Østbø, 2005). The alphas of the translated version range from 0.67 to 0.88. Cronbach's alphas in the present study ($n_{\text{survivors}} = 46/$
 $n_{\text{comparisons}} = 62$) were: N: 0.91/0.91, E: 0.86/0.81, O: 0.70/0.70, A: 0.61/0.69, C: 0.81/0.86.

Statistical analyses

The analyses were carried out by using SPSS for Windows, version 16, for the papers I and III, and version 17, for paper II. Mplus (L. K. Muthèn & Muthèn, 1998-2007), version 5.21, was used for modeling the latent growth curves (paper I) and the growth mixture modeling (paper II).

Two-tailed p-values of .05 or lower were considered statistically significant. Due to the low number of participants, p-values up to .10 were reported. In paper II, ten pair-wise comparisons were done for each outcome measure, Bonferroni corrections were applied by dividing the p-values by the number of post hoc tests.

Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics were applied to find the mean values (M) and the standard deviations (SD). Possible differences between the groups with regard to demographic variables were analyzed by Chi-square.

Group analyses

In paper I, the first research question was addressed by a series of non-parametric group comparisons (Mann-Whitney U and Chi-square tests). Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests for normal distributions indicated that all total PTSS scores, except the first, were not normally distributed.

In paper II, deviations from normality were found for approximately one fourth of the variables when contrasting survivors according to their trajectories. Also, the sizes of the classes were unequal. The Kruskal-Wallis test were run to detect the overall differences between the groups, while pair-wise Mann-Whitney U with exact p-values were used for post-hoc tests.

In paper III, the non-parametric correlation coefficient, Spearman's rho (ρ), was chosen due to deviation from normality (Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests). Multiple regression analyses were chosen as the dependent variable (total PTGI) was normally distributed. The total IES scores from the various time points of data collections served as predictors. Subsequent traumas were controlled for in a second block.

The mediating effect of the IES on the relationship between the concurrent PTGI and the associated psychological distress was also explored. The analyses followed the four steps of Baron and Kenny (1986). Firstly, the independent variable has to be related to the dependent variable. Secondly, the independent variable has to have an effect on the mediator. Thirdly, when predicting the dependent variable by the mediator, controlling for the independent variable, this path has still an effect. Finally, the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable is reduced when controlling for the mediator. The Sobel test was provided as an estimate on whether the mediation effect was statistically significant. Due to the sample size, an additional bootstrapping procedure was employed; $n = 5000$ bootstrap re-samples (Preacher & Hayes, 2004).

Latent Growth Modeling

The second research question of paper I was addressed by estimating a latent growth model (Duncan, Duncan, & Strycker, 2006) in relation to the six time points in the immediate aftermath of 1980. By this method, two latent parameters were estimated for each individual: an intercept covering the initial number of items positively endorsed; i.e., in the first three days after the disaster. In addition, a slope was computed, representing the individual recovery across those very early weeks.

To test whether the two latent parameters would predict the subsequent levels of the total PTSS at five and 27 years post disaster, the later scores were regressed on the two estimates. If significant, this would indicate that the initial stress levels, and also, the early recovery would influence the long-term outcome. Due to the limited sample size, a residual bootstrapping procedure was employed to establish the reliability of the estimate, and 500 bootstrap draws were chosen (Bollen & Stine, 1992).

Growth Mixture Modeling

In paper II, growth mixture modeling (GMM) was used to identify classes of trajectories. While traditional latent growth modeling attempts to fit one growth curve to the entire sample, the goal of the growth mixture modeling is to identify several possible latent classes of individuals within the sample. The various classes would then have different and specific growth curves (B. Muthèn, 2001).

By comparing the relative fit of the models with an increasing number of classes, the number of latent classes is determined. Bayesian Information Criteria (BIC) were compared between the models and used as fit statistics. Lower values indicate a better fit of the data.

Two independent growth processes were incorporated: the manifestations of stress during the first eight weeks by PTSS, and the repeated measures of general psychological distress from 1980 to 2007 by GHQ-20. Sixteen separate models were estimated.

Firstly, a two class-model, a three class-model, a four class-model, and a five class-model including only an intercept and a linear slope as growth parameters, were estimated for both PTSS and GHQ-20. Secondly, all four models were run with a quadratic slope for PTSS, thereby assuming non-linear growth in at least one class. Thirdly, the quadratic slope was removed for PTSS, but incorporated for GHQ-20. Finally, the quadratic slope was included for both variables.

Missing values

Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) method was applied when estimating the LGM and GMM in Mplus, hence missing values were handled.

Regarding the PTSS scores from 1985 and 2007 in paper I, six responses to single items of the 257 (2.3%) were missing. In paper II, the proportion missing single items were 19 out of 11640 (0.2%). In paper III, 10 out of 4954 (0.3%) possible single items were

missing. Suitable to low occurrences, single mean imputation were performed to replace the few missing values (Fayers & Machin, 2007). To allow estimation of chi-square tables for single items in paper I, the mean imputation of the six missing values were rounded to 0 or 1.

Ethical aspects

The study was approved by the Regional Committee for Medical and Health Research Ethics, and by the Norwegian Social Science Data Services.

Summary of results

Paper I: Initial stress responses in relation to outcome after three decades

The study aimed at predicting posttraumatic stress five and 27 years after the North Sea oil rig disaster. The predictions were based on the initial levels of stress and the early recovery reported in 1980. The Posttraumatic Stress Scale (PTSS) was used at three measure points. The items address sleep difficulties, nightmares, depressed mood, startle reactions, tendency to withdraw, irritability, unstable mood, bad conscience, fear of reminders, and tensions in the body. From 1980, data from 69 of the 70 survivors from 1980 could be used in the latent growth modeling. Follow-up studies included 65 survivors and 85 matched, unexposed oil-rig workers in 1985; and respectively, 47 and 62 in 2007.

At the 5-year follow-up, the survivors reported higher total PTSS scores than those in the comparison group (survivors/comparisons: $M = 3.1$, $SD = 2.9$ / $M = 1.4$, $SD = 1.7$; $U = 1869.5$, $p < .001$). At the 27-year follow-up, the difference did not reach significance. Nevertheless, the survivors tended to report higher levels of stress than the comparison group (survivors/comparisons: $M = 2.6$, $SD = 3.0$ / $M = 1.8$, $SD = 2.6$; $U = 1214.5$, n.s.). Except for two single items, i.e., sleep difficulties and bad conscience, the survivors in 1985 had significantly more frequent endorsements than the comparison group on every single PTSS item ($p < 0.05$). In 2007, only the items covering startle reactions ($U = 6.96$; $p < 0.05$) and the tendency to withdraw ($U = 5.02$, $p < 0.05$) remained significantly different. The initial levels of stress and the early recovery rate predicted the very long-term outcome when using the total PTSS scores after five and 27 years. Thus, initial screenings by PTSS may be helpful in the early detection of victims of posttraumatic stress in the very long-term perspective.

Paper II: Disaster survivors in their third decade – trajectories of initial stress responses and long-term course of mental health

This study looks at the trajectories of initial stress and the long-term mental health among 70 survivors from the North Sea oil rig disaster (1980). To find latent classes, a growth mixture modeling of two processes was carried out. The first growth process explored the initial stress manifestations in the first eight weeks by using the Posttraumatic Stress Scale (PTSS-10). The second explored the general mental health in 1980, 1981, 1985 and 2007 by the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-20). The survivors' scores on GHQ-20 from the last two data collections were contrasted with those of the matched group of oil workers (n = 85 in 1985) who were unexposed to trauma.

When combining early PTSS scores and the long-term GHQ-20 trajectories, four latent classes were identified for the 70 survivors. In the discussion, they were interpreted to be labeled resilient (n = 43; 61%), recovering (n = 10; 14%), chronic (n = 8; 11%), and relapsing (n = 9; 13%). Two thirds of the survivors were resilient and characterized by both a moderate PTSS starting value in addition to a rapid decline across the first eight weeks. The long-term scores on the GHQ-20 remained low. The trajectories of all those in the recovery, chronic and relapse groups had initially high and stable PTSS scores, while the long-term course on GHQ-20 differed. The chronic and the relapsing trajectories were related to a personality style with high scores on neuroticism. Early screening may identify those at risk of long-term mental health problems.

Paper III: Long-term perspectives on posttraumatic growth in disaster survivors

Findings on posttraumatic growth (PTG) and distress have not been consistent. This study examined the relationship in a very long-term perspective. The outcome measure was the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory which was completed by 46 survivors in 2007, i.e., 27 years post trauma. As the relationship between PTG and specific posttraumatic stress is widely debated, the repeated total scores of the Impact of Event Scale (IES-15) were chosen as the independent variables in the first analyses. The scores had been measured soon after the event, and again after one, five and 27 years. In the final follow-up, the general mental health (GHQ-28) was also assessed.

Strong positive associations were found between PTG and the concurrent level of posttraumatic stress. Weaker or no associations were found for their past levels of posttraumatic stress. In the regression analysis with the total PTGI as the dependent variable and the repeated IES scores from the four measure points as independent variables ($F(4,36) = 3.44, p < .05$), only the total IES from 2007 appeared as a predictor ($\beta = 0.49, p < 0.05$). Controlling for the subsequent traumatic experiences did not alter the findings ($F(5,35) = 3.13; p < .05$). IES from 2007 remained the significant predictor ($\beta = 0.45, p < 0.05$). The concurrent problems in their general mental health as measured by GHQ-28 clearly coexisted with PTG decades after a disaster, yet the association between PTG and GHQ were mediated by the concurrent posttraumatic stress (IES). The present findings suggest that self-reported posttraumatic growth decades after the trauma is related to the concurrent level of suffering.

Discussion

The main findings of this study will briefly be outlined below, and also, they will be compared with other studies. Thereafter, the strengths and limitations of the present research will be discussed before concluding.

Main findings

At the 5-year follow-up, the survivors reported higher total PTSS scores than those in the comparison group. Except for two single items, i.e., sleep difficulties and bad conscience, the survivors in 1985 had significantly more frequent endorsements than the comparison group on all single PTSS-items. At the 27-year follow-up, the difference in the total scores between the groups did not reach significance. Only the items covering the startle reactions, the tendency to withdraw and unstable mood remained significantly different. A comparable picture was seen for mental health problems. The total GHQ score differed clearly between the survivors and comparisons in 1985, but the difference had faded in 2007.

The initial levels of stress and the very early recovery rate predicted the long-term outcome when using the total PTSS scores after five and 27 years. When combining early PTSS and the long-term GHQ trajectories, four latent classes were identified; they may be called resilient, recovering, chronic, and relapsing. Two thirds of the survivors were resilient. Strong positive associations were found between posttraumatic growth (PTG) and the concurrent level of posttraumatic stress; weaker or no associations were found for the posttraumatic symptom levels of the past.

Fading symptom levels

A relatively well-established picture showing a decrease in symptoms across the first year has been drawn after disasters (Neria, et al., 2008; Norris, Friedman, & Watson, 2002). This is the first disaster study which has included a comparison group and has followed the survivors over 27 years. A continued fading in the symptom levels between survivors and the comparisons were seen over decades.

In 2007, some stress manifestations still distinguished the survivors from the comparison group: the startle reaction, the tendency to withdraw, and the unstable mood. Orr and colleagues (2003) in their twin-study demonstrated that the heart rate response to startling sounds was an acquired sign of PTSD. A recent study showed that both hypersensitivity and an exaggerated startle reaction turned out as essential markers of vulnerability in the development of PTSD (Pole et al., 2009). A sustained activation reflected by the startle reaction was reported in a two-year long-term study of survivors from an air crash accident (Michel, Lundin, & Otto, 2001). In a very long-term perspective, the startle reaction seems most persistent and calls for further explorations.

The fading stress manifestations are in line with prior studies following survivors across decades (Green, et al., 1990; Lundin & Jansson, 2007). After wars, long-lasting stress has been demonstrated in numerous retrospective studies (e.g., Amir & Lev-Wiesel, 2003; Askevold, 1976/77; Bramsen & van der Ploeg, 1999; Dirkzwager, et al., 2001; Eitinger & Strøm, 1973; Levy & Sidel, 2009) but also, after civil disasters (Favaro, et al., 2004; Holen, 1990; Hull, et al., 2002; Lazaratou, et al., 2008; Morgan, et al., 2003). With regard to the mental health problems of the oil rig survivors in 2007, the chronic and relapsing groups reported considerably higher symptom levels than the comparisons. Accordingly, persistent levels of general distress seemed to affect a minor part of the survivors.

To conclude; on the group-level, the symptom load diminishes over time. For some survivors, mental suffering persists in terms of specific posttraumatic stress, but also in the general mental health problems.

Initial stress and long-term predictions

The present findings demonstrate that the long-term links demonstrated between the early stress responses and the later outcome after exposure to war (Solomon, et al., 2006) may also apply to single civilian disasters. The findings are mixed when it comes to how well ASD may be predictive of later PTSD, but reviews have repeatedly reported the early suffering to be a potential risk factor (Norris, Friedman, & Watson, 2002; Peleg & Shalev, 2006).

Unlike prior studies which have been focusing on the long-term links between the initial responses and the outcome several decades later (Lee, et al., 1995; Solomon & Mikulincer, 2006), the present study looked at the rates of recovery as well as the levels of initial stress. The findings underscore that change over time in the very early phases may predict the later long-term outcome. This is in line with the study by Norris and colleagues (2003). They demonstrated that while early high stable symptoms were found to predict later negative outcomes, early high, but transient, symptoms did not.

The debate about the predictive value of the early symptoms is also linked to the questions of early interventions and screening. Most people recover spontaneously. Accordingly, early intervention for all has been considered as inappropriate (Litz & Maguen, 2007). By some, neither routine debriefing nor multiple sessions of early psychological intervention targeting everyone who has been exposed to traumatic events is recommended (Roberts, Kitchiner, Kenardy, & Bisson, 2009; Rose, Bisson, Churchill, & Wessely, 2002). On the other hand, interventions targeting those most at risk have been advocated (Bisson, Roberts, & Macho, 2003; Brewin et al., 2010). Useful screening tools may play an important

role. The present thesis indicates that the initial recovery from stress may serve as a screening tool in the post disaster care.

Mental health problems in the long run

Two thirds of the survivors from the North Sea oil rig disaster were classified as resilient; i.e., they reported some initial stress symptoms that quickly faded during the initial weeks. Thereafter, they stayed well across the decades. Additionally, 14% recovered more slowly; they needed some more time. One fourth reported persistent or increasing problems over the years.

One long-term retrospective study after an earthquake found about eighty percent to be affected by the event fifty years later (Lazaratou, et al., 2008). The affected proportions in the present study, however, concur with the proportion of those affected in the majority of the long-term studies; they range from 20 to 30% (Favaro, et al., 2004; Green, et al., 1990; Hull, et al., 2002; Lundin & Jansson, 2007; Morgan, et al., 2003). The findings are also in line with Bonnano (2004) who underscores that exposure to adverse events most often does not lead to lasting mental suffering.

Roughly one third is recovering from PTSD after major traumas; this was seen in the epidemiological US study (Kessler, et al., 1995), as well in a study looking at resilience after the attacks of 11th September 2001 (Bonanno, et al., 2006). With regard to prior studies on trajectories, two studies found approximately 60% to be classified as recovering over time, while 40 % did not (Nugent, et al., 2009; Orcutt, et al., 2004). Others have demonstrated that four or five trajectories fit their data better. Still, resilience and recovering were common paths (deRoos-Cassini, et al., 2010; Norris, et al., 2009).

Changing the focus to the survivors who did not recover fully after the oil-rig disaster, the 24 % who remained in the chronic or relapsing groups are matching the numbers reported by Norris and colleagues (2009). In the sample after September 11th, they found 27% to be

either in the stable high, or in any of the two trajectories moving upward in symptom loads across the first 2 ½ years. In the sample from the Mexico flood, 22% of the survivors displayed persistent severe or moderate levels of posttraumatic stress.

The North sea oil rig project had a much longer time frame. Nevertheless, the proportion of those who follow the various trajectories in relation to more mental suffering seems to include from one third to one fourth of the participants. According to the findings of the present study, the risk of long-term mental health problems may be identified quite early in the post-traumatic phase.

Risk-factors

Those reporting mental health problems over the decades reported persistent high levels of stress during the first weeks. This adds to the findings discussed above. Most oil rig survivors reported some early manifestations of stress. A failure of recovery within the first weeks or months seems to indicate various subsequent trajectories representing some kind of long-term risk. One third of those reporting high and stable stress levels initially, or 14% of the total sample, were designated as recovering. Their mental health problems gradually decreased over the years. For two thirds of those reporting initially high and stable stress, or 24% of the total sample, the mental health problems were chronic or relapsing over time.

The elevated levels on neuroticism that was seen in the chronic and relapsing groups, point at an underlying vulnerability. The levels of neuroticism were not high in the recovering group. Enduring personality change after catastrophic experiences is a diagnostic entity in the ICD-10 (World Health Organization, 1992). It is possible to speculate that the higher levels of neuroticism may also result from the adverse event, and not be a pre-morbid vulnerability, at least in some cases.

The diagnosis of major personality change is emphasized to emerge after extensive and long-lasting, extremely adverse experiences such as torture, concentration camps and

combat experiences, rather than after single disasters (Beltran & Silove, 1999). Moreover, measures of personality have been found to be stable over time (Santor, Bagby, & Joffe, 1997). In addition, neuroticism as a risk factor has been documented in prospective studies (Engelhard & van den Hout, 2007; Engelhard, et al., 2006). The findings compare well with several other studies targeting the links between personality traits and the likelihood of developing of PTSD (Cox, et al., 2004; Fauerbach, et al., 2000; Holeva & Tarrier, 2001; McFarlane, 1988a). Neuroticism may serve as an additional vulnerability marker when screening persons of risk for long-term mental health problems. The inclusion of personality measures in trauma research and in the aftercare has already been called for (Cox, et al., 2004).

The findings underscore that early screening of the survivors, may help sifting out those who run the risk of long-term suffering. Persons who do not recover in the first months, and who in addition are high on neuroticism should preferably be given special attention in the wake of adverse events.

Posttraumatic growth in a long-term perspective

The positive associations between posttraumatic growth and posttraumatic stress that often is found, have been explained to result from cognitive restructuring needed to bring about PTG (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Tedeschi, et al., 1998). The findings in 2007 demonstrate strong positive associations between distress and growth even after almost three decades. The current levels of posttraumatic stress can hardly be seen as a part of a still ongoing cognitive restructuring. Rather, the reports of growth may be seen as a way to deal with the suffering present in the survivors (McFarland & Alvaro, 2000; Taylor & Brown, 1988; Wortman, 2004).

The findings of the present study could also be discussed in light of a recent concept, the Centrality of event scale (CES; Berntsen & Rubin, 2006). The scale has 20 items detecting

how central an adverse event has become in the person's life and identity. In this approach, the prevention of integrating the negative aspects of the trauma is highlighted. A strong focus on the adverse event may not serve the purpose of restoring health. Higher scores on CES in survivors who built their identities on the trauma exposure were associated with higher levels of PTSD symptoms (Berntsen & Rubin, 2007).

Accordingly, the strong positive associations between PTG and posttraumatic stress may possibly relate to the impact that the oil-rig disaster still has on the survivors' daily lives. That is, if their everyday lives and self-images are closely shaped by the disaster, this may result in high levels on scales such as the IES, PTSS and GHQ, targeting negative outcomes, as well as on the PTGI targeting positive outcomes. The unconditional acceptance of the adaptive function of PTG has been questioned (Zoellner & Maercker, 2006).

The present study did not look directly at possible links between resilience and posttraumatic growth. PTG was associated with continued mental suffering. Accordingly, posttraumatic growth and resilience do not seem to involve identical dimensions of the outcome. This challenge the reading of PTG as a kind of resilience (Lepore & Revenson, 2005). More likely, the findings concur with a recent trauma study which demonstrated an inverse relationship between the two constructs of posttraumatic growth and resilience (Levine, et al., 2009).

The present study did not include structured measures of general well-being. Although finding high associations between PTG and mental health problems and posttraumatic stress, the results may not imply less well-being for those reporting growth. Distinct biological correlates for well-being and ill-being have been demonstrated (Ryff et al., 2006). The call for a richer conceptual framework than the often used pathogenic scheme (Layne, et al., 2007) seems adequate. Further work is needed to explore the longitudinal aspects of PTG and posttraumatic distress.

Strengths and limitations

The main strength of this study is the repeated follow-up studies of a complete survivor population across almost three decades in combination with a matched comparison group. Such a long time span is so far, rare in disaster related research. An extended time frame is also associated with some limitations.

Several of the self-report questionnaires of today did not exist in the early phases of the data collections. Accordingly, they could only be included at later points. Hence, it is impossible exactly to infer what might have been the links between the reported level of posttraumatic growth and their mental health suffering from earlier points in time.

The use of repeated, identical measures over the four waves adds strength to the study; it allows analyses of change over time. The findings concur well with those of others.

The assessment of personality 27 years after the target event, calls for some caution in the interpretations. Conclusions about casual relationships may not be convincing, but may generate hypotheses for future studies. Endorsements of the initial manifestations of stress were retrospective. However, the mean of the time that had passed after the event was relatively short; it was approximately five months from the disaster and about three months from the last of the initial measure points.

A possible limitation might be the 22 years passing between the last two data collections from 1985 to 2007. Fluctuations may have taken place that this questionnaire approach did not detect.

The present study is based on the total population of Norwegian survivors after a civilian disaster. Having a total population is a strength in disaster research, especially when taking the high participation into account. On the other hand, the limited number of survivors puts restrictions on the statistical methods that may be applied. A low number of participants always calls for caution when generalizing the findings.

Another strength, but also a limitation, is related to gender; the population consisted only of men. They were screened before starting their offshore work. None had previously been hospitalized for psychiatric conditions. Thus, the findings would probably have demonstrated more psychopathology if it was drawn from a regular community sample of men. The findings may not readily be transferred to women. In a small sample, not having to account for the gender issues also adds to the strengths.

Conclusions

The long-term adaption of the oil rig workers compares well to the emerging picture after trauma found in other studies when looking at change over time. Most of the men were resilient; although many reported some initial distress, they quickly bounced back to their normal functioning. The importance in underscoring the human capacity to return back to balance has been called for (Wessely, 2005).

The present results show that posttraumatic growth reported after 27 years was associated with more mental problems. Further studies are needed to shed light on whether quantitative scales of posttraumatic growth and its likes, really measures what they intend to.

The horrifying experiences on that fatal early evening of 27th March 1980 seem to have caused continued or relapsing courses of mental suffering for about 1 out of 4 survivors. The present findings demonstrate that careful monitoring of the initial stress responses in addition to aspects of personality may be helpful in the prevention of long-term psychological problems.

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