Selected highlights of the ISTSS 2008 Annual Meeting

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This special section of the *Journal of Traumatic Stress* contains 9 papers based on some of the key presentations from the 24th International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies (ISTSS) Annual Meeting held in Chicago in November 2008. The papers reflect two of the many topics covered in the meeting.

The conference theme focused on “Terror and its Aftermath.” In the first part of the special section, there are papers by Danieli on reparative justice and by Steel, Bateman Steel, and Silove on human rights and the trauma model. They cover different ways of applying an understanding of human rights to the field of psychotraumatology. Danieli, for example, contrasts the harmful effects of the conspiracy of silence with the potential benefits available through the legal process of obtaining justice and reparation. Steel et al. outline three “generations” of human rights—civil and political; economic, social and cultural; and collective or group rights—considering the relevance of each of these to work with trauma.

Within the conference, there was also a day-long special track on DSM-V. In the second part of the special section, there are 7 papers covering many of the topics covered in the meeting. The next revision of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) is underway and it is important that ISTSS makes an effective contribution to this task. We were able to hear from Katherine Phillips, chair of the Anxiety, Obsessive-Compulsive Spectrum, Posttraumatic, and Dissociative Disorders Work Group, and member of the DSM-V Task Force, about the process that has already been initiated and from Matt Friedman about some of the important questions the group had to consider. This is not just an academic exercise. The decisions made by the APA may have an important influence on the way this whole
field develops over the next 20 years. Invited lecturers were then asked to summarise current evidence relevant to this debate. Diversity of presentation was encouraged. There is no single party line to follow; we believe that the emphasis has to be on the application of best available knowledge. In some cases, there were very strong scientific data and in others, an argument for further research to follow through on preliminary findings and clinical experience.

This part of the special section opens with a provocative paper by Brewin, Lanius, Novac, Schnyder, and Galea, who propose a radical reformulation of PTSD with a focus on what they see as the core phenomenon of reexperiencing in the present a past event that is still perceived as severely threatening. Kilpatrick, Resnick, and Acierno also challenge the inclusion of the trauma (A) criterion although they consider a number of options other than simple deletion. Resick and Miller argue that PTSD should be in a new section of the DSM for traumatic-stress disorders.

Traumatic experiences may have different effects at different ages. This theme is developed in two ways here. First, there is a paper by Pynoos, Steinberg, Layne, Briggs, Ostrowski and Fairbank which argues for a stronger developmental approach to defining the criteria for PTSD. It must be the case, for example, that very young children experience a trauma in different ways from adults and have a different repertoire of responses. There is a need for more research but this is an important topic and one that should be tackled. Then, Cloitre and colleagues outline the potential for a pervasive, developmental effect of trauma leading to complex presentations.

Finally, there are three biological papers. Shin and Handwerger summarize the evidence for PTSD as a stress-induced fear circuitry disorder. Koenen, Amstadter, and
Nugent present an update on the ever-changing evidence base for the role of gene-environment interactions; and Yehuda and Bierer consider the potential for epigenetic factors to influence the development of PTSD.

Working with trauma survivors inevitably involves a multi-level approach. These papers from the ISTSS annual meeting of 2008 confirm the complexity of the subject. The specific issue of classification in DSM-V and ICD-11 is seen as such an important topic that it is now the conference theme of the 2009 annual meeting of ISTSS (www.istss.org) to be held in Atlanta, Georgia between November 5th and 7th, 2009. It is our hope that the papers in this special section, as well as the presentations at the forthcoming meeting, will stimulate further dialogue, debate, and empirical research to inform the development of this field.