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“It should not have happened”: metaphorical expressions, idioms, and narrative descriptions related to trauma in an indigenous community in India

Karin Rechsteiner ^a, Varsha Tol ^b and Andreas Maercker ^a

^aPsychopathology and Clinical Intervention, Institute of Psychology, University of Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland; ^bKEM Hospital Research Centre, Pune, India

ABSTRACT

Purpose: Psychological trauma can be viewed as a metaphor which originates from somatic medicine and comes from the Greek word “wound”. To gain a better understanding of trauma in a culturally sensitive way, the present project aimed to explore alternative metaphors used to describe extreme aversive or catastrophic events.

Methods: This ethnopsychological study was carried out among the *Adivasis* indigenous people in tribal communities in Pune, India. We performed 28 interviews with lay persons and key informants, focusing on collectively shared metaphors. The data were examined using systematic metaphor analysis.

Results: While the most prevalent metaphorical concepts found related to *shock* and *wound*, we also identified culture-specific idioms and common themes in the descriptions related to trauma. The most predominant expression, which was used by all of the participants, was “this should not have happened” (*asa nahi vhayala pahije hota*). These findings indicate that metaphorical concepts reflect implicit worldviews and beliefs in the community under study.

Conclusion: The main implication of the results found is to increase awareness of different expressions in clinical settings, pointing to potential approaches to the cultural adaptation of clinical interventions in general.

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Cultural concepts of trauma; idioms of distress; metaphor analysis; trauma; indigenous people; India

Introduction

The concept of psychological trauma implies that people experiencing traumatic stress or showing posttraumatic symptoms are wounded, analogically to a physical injury (Maercker & Heim, 2016). Although the *wound* metaphor has been well-established in Western countries, recent emic literature presents other concepts or metaphors for extreme aversive or catastrophic events, such as *baksbat* translated as broken courage, *susto* meaning fright, and *noro* as a form of spiritual contamination (Baer et al., 2003; Chhim, 2013; Stark, 2006). Conceptual metaphor theory has demonstrated how metaphors are pervasive in everyday life, influencing not just language, but also thought and action (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Metaphors have the power to both transmit and reflect fundamental concepts and values embedded in one’s culture. In this sense, such an analogy to a physical injury should be expected to shape implicit notions related to psychological trauma (Rechsteiner & Meili, 2019). In turn, cultural attributes related to trauma can be reflected in culture specific expressions used to describe catastrophic or aversive events (for an overview, see Maercker, Heim, & Kirmayer, 2018).

It has been well-documented that the way cultural groups experience, understand, and communicate suffering differs significantly across cultural groups. Ways of experiencing and talking about personal or social concerns specific to a particular cultural group are generally referred to as *idioms of distress* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The study of idioms of distress originally emerged out of research done in India, exploring alternative ways of expressing distress such as somatization as a form of psychological complaint (Nichter, 2010). However, aside from studies focusing on the idiom *tension*, a syndrome including rapid-onset anger, irritation, rumination, and sleeplessness, little subsequent work has continued to systematically explore idioms of distress in India (Weaver, 2017).

Several specific posttraumatic cultural concepts of distress have been identified in other cultures (for a review, see Rasmussen, Keatley, & Joscelyne, 2014). Cultural concepts of distress can also be transmitted through metaphorical language, including specific metaphors related to trauma (de Jong & Reis, 2010). In the last decades, metaphor analysis has gained importance in different areas of psychology, including research on mechanisms underlying psychiatric disorders, such as anorexia and depression (e.g., Bates, 2015; Kaviani & Hamed, 2011). Especially when it comes to

extremely aversive life events, metaphors have been suggested to be a helpful tool to express emotions that might be too painful to address directly and so help process the trauma (Lyddon, Clay, & Sparks, 2001). Given the culture-sensitive nature of metaphor conceptualization, metaphor analysis presents a method with high potential to provide insight into how traumata are perceived and verbally expressed in non-Western cultures (Low & Cameron, 1999).

Broad claims about psychology and its concepts are mainly drawn from Westernized, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) societies which are often implicitly assumed to be globally representative (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). At least in culturally informed areas of psychology researchers try to be more aware of issues concerning ethnocentrism. However, the tendency to use one's own culture as a reference point to interpret and evaluate other cultures continues to have a significant impact on psychological descriptions and explanations of non-Western people (Chakkarath, 2010). Indigenous psychology is one of the branches of psychology proposing a different "theoretical and empirical approach that aims to overcome the stereotypical assessments that were in most cases introduced by colonialism and its theoretical justifications that reflect ethnocentrism and even the racism of times past" (Chakkarath, 2010, p. 7).

The following study, therefore, concentrated on an Indian ethnic group that is assumed to be distant to medicalized everyday knowledge and its assumptions. Adivasis (adi = original and vasi = inhabitant, meaning indigenous people) include different tribal communities such as the Mahadev Koli, Thakars, and Katkari. This ethnopsychological study was conducted in a rural area close to the city of Pune in the state of Maharashtra, mainly among the Mahadev Koli tribe. Most of the Mahadev Koli live in Maharashtra, and their primary occupation nowadays is agriculture and the cultivation of rice, potatoes, and other crop yields and the predominant religion among them is Hinduism. For centuries, they have been living an autochthonous life based on the natural environment, preserving cultural practices and traditions. They are known for their strong connection with the forest around them, maintaining a symbiotic relationship with nature (Pawar, 2013).

To gain a better understanding of the term and concept of trauma in a culturally sensitive way, the present project aimed to explore metaphors used to describe extreme aversive or catastrophic events among the Adivasis in India. This basic research attempted to explore metaphorical expressions used by a community that is not familiar with westernized medical concepts. In this study, we investigated the following questions: 1) How do the Adivasis talk about extreme aversive events using metaphorical concepts, idioms, and descriptions?; 2) What are the main metaphors related to extreme aversive events and do they

considerably differ from Western metaphors like wound and shock?; 3) What are the main expressions used by Adivasis to describe overcoming aversive events?; and 4) How are the metaphorical expressions contextualized within the culture under study?

Methods

This study is part of a larger cultural clinical project being conducted in several countries including Brazil and Switzerland, focusing on metaphors relating to extreme aversive events and how they are overcome (Meili, Heim, & Maercker, 2018). All studies used qualitative methods, including a semi-structured interview guide for individual interviews. The ethnopsychological study presented here was conducted in India, in a rural area close to the city of Pune in the state of Maharashtra. Field work was carried out in November 2017 in the following villages: Kharpud, Ghangaldare, Gohe, and Rajewadi. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. All study procedures were pre-approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Zurich in Switzerland, and locally by the Ethics Committee of the KEM Hospital Research Centre, Pune in India.

Recruitment of participants and procedures

In collaboration with the KEM Research Hospital Centre it was decided to search for an indigenous population around Pune. Participants were recruited with the help of two local field assistants by purposive sample, aiming to interview both laypersons and key informants (i.e., community leaders, elders, teachers, etc.). Interviews were conducted in the participant's homes and also outside in the crop fields as the study took place during harvesting time. The first author and DN conducted all interviews in Marathi which is the local language commonly spoken in the study area. Twenty-three semi-structured interviews plus three focus groups were conducted, including a total of 28 participants (age range 18–65 years old; 16 women). The main aim of introducing the focus groups was to validate that the identified metaphorical expressions shared the same meaning within the community (Mruck & Mey, 2000).

From the 28 participants, nine were key informants including four ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist) workers, three *Sarpanchs* (i.e., local political leaders in the communities), one teacher, and one traditional healer. Two informal interviews with a medical doctor working in the different communities were conducted. The remaining participants were villagers (e.g., farmers, housewives, and students). All of the participants were Adivasis, and most were members of the Mahadev Koli tribe. After reaching theoretical saturation within the Mahadev Koli sample, one focus group followed by four individual interviews were conducted with members of

the Thakars tribal community. As both tribal communities described very similar cultural backgrounds and no systematic differences were found in relation to the expressions used in their narratives, interviews from both samples were combined and analysed together.

Semi-structured interviews

The semi-structured interview guide consisted of the following parts: 1) an open question about extremely aversive events people in the community have experienced and how they dealt with them (Dow, Dandeneau, Phillips, Kirmayer, & McCormick, 2008) 2) questions aiming to elicit descriptions of traumatic events in general, such as "What are the worst events that can happen in people's lives?" (modified after Kohrt & Hruschka, 2010) 3) specific questions designed to elicit metaphorical expressions such as "When you are asked to imagine something horrible, what images come to mind?" and "Experiencing horrible events is like ...?"; and 4) a Word-Association-Task (modified after Priya, 2012) including words related to trauma and positive responses to extreme adversity: "unforgettable event", "danger", "wound", "fear", "catastrophe", "misfortune", "tragedy", "shock"; and to positive responses to extreme adversity: "overcoming", "recovery", "healing", "adaptation", "development", "personal growth". After initial interviews, questions were revised and adapted according to local expressions used by the participants.

All formal interviews were audio-recorded, translated into English, and transcribed by two psychologists and one anthropologist, all native Marathi speaking and fluent in English. Interviews lasted between 35 and 110 minutes. Interview transcripts and field notes were analysed using qualitative data and mixed method analysis software (MAXQDA, V.12.3).

Metaphor analysis and content analysis

After initial familiarization with the material, we decided to extend the data analysis and to include not only metaphors, but also idioms and descriptions. For the identification of metaphors, we chose the technique of systematic metaphor analysis developed by Schmitt (2017). According to Schmitt (2017), the basic criteria for defining a metaphor are (a) a word/phrase that has more than just literal meaning in the context relevant to the use of speech and (b) the literal meaning refers to a semantic field (source) that is transferred to a second, often more abstract domain (target). This method follows an inductive-abductive approach for interpreting metaphors in the social sciences. It provides a systematic way of organizing textual data consisting of three steps: (1) the word-by-word identification and collection of metaphorical expressions into one general list; (2) the categorization of metaphors into concepts by iteratively differentiating, extending, and specifying

them through systematic comparison and synthesis of the expressions into metaphorical concepts; and (3) the interpretation and analysis of the metaphorical concepts regarding the social, cultural, and historical context. As previously mentioned, this project initially attempted to identify collective metaphors shared by the particular groups under study. We focused on the most frequent metaphors used across participants independently of gender, age, profession, etc. Metaphorical expressions used by only one participant were coded as idiosyncratic metaphors.

In parallel, idioms and descriptions related to psychological trauma were coded and classified according to the method of content analysis developed by Kuckartz (2012). Collective ways of experiencing and talking about trauma particular to that cultural group were coded as idioms. For the purpose of this study, we used the working definition of idioms as an expression in the usage of language that is peculiar to itself, not always translatable to other languages. In this sense, although idioms can be metaphorical in nature they do not necessarily involve an implicit comparison or a source and a target domain. Descriptions included reports of types of extreme aversive events, but also the causes and consequences related to it. Two main themes emerged from the narrative descriptions: *ways of processing* and *overcoming extreme aversive events*. Subtopics for both themes were identified and analysed according to the cultural context. Two coders analysed all of the interviews and additional two coders analysed 50% of the interviews. To ensure interrater agreements, the coders discussed the codebook and the classification of metaphors during several data sessions, following the quality criteria for validation as specified by Mruck and Mey (2000).

Findings

Trauma types

The Adivasis interviewed mentioned a number of types of extreme aversive or catastrophic events experienced in their community. When asked about the worst that could possibly happen to them, most of the participants referred to the loss of a loved one. Another common topic was a landslide which happened in 2014 in a different village close to the ones visited by us. In addition, participants reported the following types of extreme aversive events: automobile accidents, other accidents like work accidents, animal attacks such as snake bites, tigers, wild pigs, etc., health issues such as severe diseases, injuries, delivery complications, and natural calamities including fire, heavy rain, and lightnings. While mainly women reported cases of domestic violence, which they witnessed in the community, men mentioned issues related to extreme poverty (i.e., the risk of suicide after problems

with harvesting). Participants also mentioned issues related to violence such as physical assault, robberies, murder, and rape, although these were allegedly not directly experienced in the community.

The respondents also mentioned that showing behaviour that is considered deviant by the community, such as having premarital sex, could have a devastating impact especially for women. They were labelled to be at risk of social exclusion in the case of experiencing sexual violence, as they were usually falsely blamed for it. As one participant explained “So if someone is getting raped, her entire family would get a black spot on it (...) Your daughter must have done something. She must have hung out with the wrong boys. Or she must have attracted those guys”. Sexual violence was a taboo topic which people do not talk about as described by another participant:

If a painful incident happens, there are two types: either bad or good. If someone is dead or someone meets with an accident, then people come, but if a girl is raped or like that, then people stop talking in the house. Or if we go somewhere, then they speak bad things behind us. And if there is an accident or something, people come and talk.

In this sense, the experience of sexual violence seems to have additional negative consequences in someone’s life, related to the lack of support in addition to being demoralized by the family and the community.

Metaphorical expressions

The most noticeable metaphors for extreme adversity used among the Adivasis relate to the concepts of *shock*, *wound/damage*, and *burden*. *Shock* (dhakka) was used to describe aversive events that happen unexpectedly, causing severe distress and disbelief, such as natural disasters or automobile accidents, but also the loss of a loved one. As one female key informant explained: “Something happened all of a sudden, and we get a shock when the news comes to you. During that time, we have to recover ourselves for some few days from that shock”. A male traditional healer referred to the impact of a “mental shock”, which was confirmed by another participant who connected a “shocking event” to a “wound in the mind”. The strong emotional impact caused by such extreme or catastrophic events can be related to the bodily sensation of being shaken. At the same time, the literal meaning of shock as a sudden push or tremble reflects how this cultural group perceives catastrophic or aversive events; as something very disturbing, but potentially having only a temporary impact.

On the other hand, the concept of *wound* (jakkham) was used to describe the long-lasting impact of extreme adversities. As one young female participant explained, rape for example leaves an emotional wound, in contrast to less severe adversities.

Emotional wound can be healed sometimes. I think a girl who is raped will have that thing somewhere in her life. Even if she tries to forget it, or if she is changed, still that thing will remain somewhere. She will remember that this event has passed in her life. But if a girl is in love, and that guy leaves her then that wound can be healed.

Expressions referring to the metaphor of a *physical wound*, as “wound in the mind” (manasik jakham), but also as something that can or cannot be healed (e.g., “things that once happened, which can’t be healed now”). The metaphor of wound was closely related to the concept of *damage*, which included expressions such as “thinking about it harms the body”, “hurts the mind”, “rape in the mind”. Another metaphorical concept used to describe the long-lasting impact of potentially traumatic events was *burden*. Extreme aversive events were seen as a physical load or something negative to carry (e.g., “things that you carry in your head”, “psychological burden”, “a lot of load”).

Container, *personification*, and *ontological* metaphors were found according to conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Two types of container metaphors related to trauma were identified. Firstly, a negative situation was described as a container such as *getting out of a bad situation* (nibhavun hene) or unspecified containers such as “God took him out of that”. Secondly, people were described as a container for distress (e.g., “no one can bear as many problems”). Also, single body parts such as the head (e.g., “if you carry it in your head then it would trouble you”) or a person’s life were used as containers for extreme adversities in the narratives. One middle-aged female farmer explained that shocking events “come to your mind until you are alive”. As mentioned before, sexual violence was also regarded as “something that will remain somewhere”, pointing out to the striking consequences of this type of trauma.

The image of the body and the mind as a container for negative memories and feelings was often used to describe the potential long-lasting effects of traumatic experiences. One middle-aged female informer explained that for them, the concept of mind relates to the heart, and not to the brain as in most Western countries. It’s also interesting to note that participants frequently talked about their minds instead of themselves (e.g., “our mind doesn’t accept it”).

Personification metaphors pictured the event itself taking actions like a human being, emphasizing the power of a tragic situation. An older female participant said for example “one would say that this disaster should not have *come* to her”. The idea of an event moving towards a person was often mentioned in the narratives, and the particular way of phrasing can be regarded as a culturally specific expression. The category of ontological metaphors relates to extreme aversive events as something measurable, like an object or

something concrete. Such metaphors usually related to the extreme aversive event as something big. For example, a young male farmer used the metaphorical expression, when describing an automobile accident “we were saved from something very big”. Another young female participant also used the same expression when talking about the landslide “I don’t recall anything as big”.

Idioms

The informants used several idioms related to extreme aversive experiences in their narratives. Table I presents the main Marathi idioms identified related to trauma, including both phrases and single expressions.

The most predominant idiomatic expression, was “this should not have happened” (asa nahi vhayala pahije hota). Although at the beginning of the study this idiom went unnoticed, all of the participants mentioned it at some point during the interview, mostly in reference to the first reaction in the aftermath of a traumatic experience. Its use varied slightly (e.g., “This incident/situation should not have happened”, “They should not have done this”, etc.). Some participants also mentioned “This incident should not happen to anyone/others”, implying solidarity towards others.

Another expression which was frequently used related to the abruptness of these events: “something that happens all of a sudden” (achanak kahitari hota/patkan hota). Participants gave examples of sudden deaths and accidents, but also mentioned this expression when describing a shocking or tragic event in general. Other idioms were negative feelings resulting from extreme aversive experiences such as “fear” (bhiti) or “sorrow” (dhukka), but also the description of the event as “horrible” (bhayanak) or “bad” (vait).

Besides, “tension”, “stress” (taan) and “trouble” (traas), were used to describe both traumatic and non-traumatic experiences. The transliteration “tension”, for example, was used to describe family problems such as disagreements but also worrying about chronic diseases of a family member. “Stress” was related to both physical and mental stress, which could be a result of daily hassles such as interpersonal difficulties, marriage arrangements or not being able to finish work.

Table I. Marathi idioms related to psychological trauma.

Marathi idiom (transliteration)	English translation
<i>Phrases</i>	
Asa nahi vhayala pahije hota	“This should not have happened”
Achanak kahitari hota patakan	“Something happens all of a sudden”
<i>Expressions</i>	
Bhiti	Fear
Bhayanak	Horrible
Dukkha	Sorrow/pain/sadness
Ghabarle	Scared
Manasik tras	Mental stress
Taan	Stress
Tension	Tension
Tras	Trouble
Vait goshta/prasanga	Bad event

“Trouble” mainly related to the results of a shocking experience but was also linked to problems at home.

Descriptions

Participants listed several types of extreme aversive events and causes and consequences attributed to them. Most of such expressions were not metaphors or idioms. Since the focus of the current study is on metaphors, these descriptions are summarized here into two main themes. First, *ways of processing extreme aversive events* and second, *strategies to overcome extreme aversive events*.

Processing extreme aversive events

Respondents described several ways of how they deal with extremely aversive events in the community. Common themes mentioned by most of the participants and informants in their narratives were identified, which were coded as 1) *first reactions to extreme aversive events (disbelief, questioning, and difficulties with accepting)*; 2) *dealing with memories related to the event (trying to forget and remembering)*; and 3) *effects and consequences of the event (impact on the heart/mind)*.

The first reaction to traumatic experiences was usually described as questioning the incident in different ways. Participants commonly used rhetorical questions (e.g., “why did this happen?”), but also expressed a need to understand why that particular event happened (e.g., “If it’s an accident then I feel like how did that happen?”). This first initial reaction of questioning was usually related to a feeling of disbelief, expressed with the idiom “it should not have happened”. A young male participant explained: “When something happens to me, and I think about it, again and again, the thoughts that come to my mind are: *Why did this happen? This should not have happened*”. Participants frequently used these idiomatic expressions when narrating their difficulties in accepting the news of tragic events such as the landslide or sudden deaths.

After such initial reactions to the traumatic event, many participants mentioned one should “try to forget it”. The participants explained that one should “ignore what happened” or “leave it in the past”, mainly by occupying themselves with work or seeking support in the community. When asked about what advice should be given to a person who went through an extreme aversive life event, one older informant responded:

I will advise the person by saying: the event has passed so try to forget it now. I would ask them to pretend like nothing has happened. So from now look after your kids and your own living. Get busy in it and try to forget it. If you hurt your mind thinking again and again, then it will cause mental stress. So, I will tell him/her that. The things that once happened

cannot be healed now. But if you carry it in your head then it would trouble you.

However, participants also explained that in more severe cases the attempt of trying to forget may not succeed, and the incident would be remembered.

Concepts and strategies related to overcoming extreme aversive events

In general, participants spontaneously mentioned coping strategies and positive responses when speaking about extreme aversive events. During data analysis, we noted that concepts of trauma were interconnected with concepts of overcoming so that it seemed artificial not to consider them as well.

After initial reactions to the traumatic event, most of the participants described practical ways of trying to deal with extreme adversities, such as *searching for solutions* to the problems. Participants often mentioned practical ways for dealing with extremely aversive events, such as seeking medical help after an accident or trying to borrow money if needed. Alternatively, if they assumed nothing could be done in such situations, they would try to forget about it using several strategies. Such coping strategies can be mainly subsumed under *social support* and *self-engagement*. This included social support from relatives or members in the community or engaging themselves in work or pleasant activities such as going to the forest. Many participants also mentioned the important role that the mind plays in the process of overcoming. To receive social support or to distract oneself with activities was regarded as a way of *relaxing the mind*.

In these contexts, religious beliefs come into play. Participants often referred to fate, destiny, or God's will as causal assumptions for traumatic events, so that religious practices like offerings to the Gods were part of their daily life. Some of the participants attributed the causes of illness to *bachercha*, a cultural explanation and perceived cause for "external diseases" caused by evil spirits. However, most of them mentioned that these are old superstitions mainly believed by the older generations and no longer by the younger ones.

Time was also frequently mentioned as an important factor in the process of accepting extreme aversive events. The Adivasis seem to have a clear idea of how many days one needs to recover of an extreme aversive event, ranging from two to 15 days. This might be related to some of the rituals they perform as a community. In case of loss of a community member, for example, the entire community stops working and stays together until a crow comes to eat the offerings, or alternatively they give it to a cow after ten days. Such rituals might give them a bounded time notion for venting out their feelings during difficult life experiences, but also getting support from the community.

Combined, these strategies seem to express *acceptance*, which in turn can result in positive responses to extreme adversities. The main positive response reported by the Adivasis related to ways of what can be subsumed as *empowerment*, such as "becoming a better person", "being able to do anything", "not tolerating injustices anymore", and "helping others going through similar processes". Interestingly, while men focused more on practical issues when describing how to overcome negative life events, women expressed more emotional coping and referred to the concept of mind more often.

Discussion

The goal of this field study was to explore and contextualize metaphors, idioms, and descriptions related to trauma used by the Adivasis in India. Recurrent themes on how people from this particular rural community process and overcome trauma were also identified. This is a unique sample as they are located in a remote rural village, living at the intersection of traditional values and the increasing dominance of the westernized world. We identified few metaphorical expressions, one predominant idiomatic expression and some common themes in how the Adivasis process and overcome extreme aversive events, will be discussed next.

The metaphorical expressions found related to the concepts of *shock*, *wound*, *burden*, *container*, *personification*, and *ontological* metaphors. All of these concepts can be regarded as primary metaphors reflecting bodily processes that are both experiential and psychophysiological (Kirmayer & Ramstead, 2017). Kövecses (2010) proposed that primary metaphors are linked to bodily sensations, explaining the universal character of the metaphors found. Both shock and wound can be regarded as pan-culturally established metaphors, dating back to the first expressions related to extreme aversive events, namely *trauma* (related to somatic medicine) and *shell shock* (Maercker & Heim, 2016; Young, 1997). It is interesting to note that while the Adivasis mainly used shock to describe accidental trauma such as automobile accidents and natural disasters, wound was mainly related to the long-term consequences of interpersonal or man-made trauma. This categorical difference in terms of trauma consequences has been previously described in a theoretical framework by Maercker and colleagues (Maercker & Horn, 2013).

The metaphorical concept *burden* mainly included expressions reflecting the psychological distress caused by extreme aversive events. The connection between the source domain of burden and negative emotions such as fear, anger, and sadness has also been described from a culture unspecific point of view (Kövecses, 1988). The use of expressions related to conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003) also refers to features of the

traumatic descriptions. The concepts of *personification of the situation* and *ontological metaphors* were mainly used to emphasize the severity of the traumatic event. The container metaphor was used in two different ways, relating directly to the experience (*negative situation as a container*) and its several consequences (*body as a container* for negative memories and feelings). The same container metaphors were found in Spanish language relating to negative emotions as bounded spaces and *emotions as fluids in a container* (Reali & Arciniegas, 2015).

The findings of this study partly support evidence from other qualitative studies from our own overarching research project exploring metaphorical expressions in other rural communities (see Rechsteiner, Maercker, Meili, & Heim, 2019). Similar concepts relating to primary embodied metaphors were also found in Brazil and Switzerland (Maercker & Heim, 2016; Meili et al., 2018; Meili, Heim, Pelosi, & Maercker, 2019; Rechsteiner & Meili, 2019). Such universal metaphors can be described as archetypal qualities, reflecting a discourse of collective experiences (Jung, 1969). In this sense, the body can be understood as a source of fundamental meanings or a semantic template becoming a “pan-cultural universal” (Sheets-Johnstone, 1994). However, the Adivasis were very descriptive and made unexpectedly little use of metaphorical expressions. Instead, they used idioms and descriptions to talk about trauma. This finding could be related to previous ones suggesting that somatic expression of psychological distress is common in India (Pillai, Mehta, & Chaudhari, 2016).

The most frequently used expression by the Adivasis was “this should not have happened”. We assume that this expression relates to cultural or religious beliefs which are common within the Adivasis. All of the participants were Hindus, to whom the concept of karma plays an important role. Karma refers to the principle that life is governed by a system of causes and effects or actions and reactions (Thrane, 2010). In this sense, this expression can be interpreted as an (unconscious) attempt to break this chain reaction after experiencing extreme adversities. The Adivasis used this term in connection to an initial reaction of disbelief, followed by an attempt to solve the situation or alternatively try to forget it. In contrast to what “it should not have happened” might imply, this expression actually infers accepting the extreme aversive event. “It should not have happened” can thus be understood as a cultural script—a reflection of social conventions in the form of commonly held assumptions, relating to a sequence of actions that occur and reoccur in similar ways as a response to trauma (Chentsova-Dutton & Maercker, 2019). As described by Chentsova-Dutton and Maercker (2019), cultural scripts involve both mental representations such as culture-specific beliefs and

emotions as well as patterns of behaviours such as overcoming strategies adapted by the community in the form of ritualized behaviours.

The Adivasis described that after an initial reaction of disbelief, they soon try to find practical solutions to the aversive situations or instead try to forget about it by engaging themselves in work or pleasant activities. They also have shown a strong sense of community reporting high social support in general, especially in response to extreme adversity. Surprisingly, many of the cultural scripts related to responses to trauma identified in this community are equivalent to key Western resilience constructs such as active coping style, physical exercise, spirituality, and social support (Ballenger-Browning & Johnson, 2010). Although these cultural scripts seem to apply for most types of traumatic events, interpersonal violence seems to be an exception.

The type of traumatic event seems to have a big influence in whether the responses will follow an ideal, normative, or pathological path. In case of an automobile accident, for example, an ideal and normative path would be to solve practical issues such as driving to the hospital, asking for financial support in the family or the community to cover health related costs, seek for social support, and then trying to forget about the incident by getting back to work or engaging in pleasant activities. This cultural script would not be applied in the case of sexual violence though. Because of deep-seated taboos surrounding sexuality, the cultural scripts in this case would refer to the victim remaining silent, leading to the withdrawal of helpful strategies to overcome that. The cases of physical and sexual violence described were mainly towards women, who were usually assumed to be to blame for its occurrence. This relates to rigid traditional gender roles and is a consequence of the imbalance of power that women still are subject to in India (e.g., Dewey, 2009).

Limitations

Some limitations of this study must be mentioned. First, the interviews were not conducted in lingua franca, instead they were conducted in Marathi and simultaneously translated into English. However, as this study followed a hermeneutic and not a linguistic approach, the focus lied on the ideas and concepts behind the words and not the linguistic expressions itself. Second, there are potential differences in the usage of the expressions across gender, age, and educational level, and this study was largely unable to address these. Although these factors were taken into consideration during data analysis, they should be analysed systematically to better understand how sociodemographic variables are related to the way people perceive and talk about trauma. Third, these findings give insight into how this particular group perceives and expresses traumatic experiences, which

cannot be generalized for other rural or indigenous communities. Instead, this study provides a new methodological approach to better understand trauma. Additional studies contrasting metaphors of extreme aversive events in other cultural groups could deepen knowledge about trauma from a culturally sensitive perspective.

Conclusion

In this article, we have presented different examples of how trauma is perceived and expressed in an indigenous rural community in South India. To the best of our knowledge, this interdisciplinary project is the first one to analyse metaphors on trauma from a cross-cultural perspective. Metaphorical concepts and idiomatic expressions did reflect implicit worldviews and beliefs of the community under study. While metaphors were mainly embodied showing similarities to concepts from other cultures, idioms such as “it should not have happened” were particular to this cultural group. The way this community processes and overcomes extreme aversive events is a reflection of the religiously influenced socio-cultural background and collectivistic philosophy of the Adivasis. Metaphor analysis can be seen as a potential tool to better understand how cultural groups experience, perceive, and communicate trauma. Especially when it comes to speaking about experiences that are difficult to put into words, it is important to pay attention to how they are framed. The main implication of these findings is to increase awareness of different expressions of trauma in both individual treatment and large-scaled mental-health interventions. Also, acknowledging the socio-cultural context is necessary to understand how particular cultural groups process and cope with traumatic experiences, which is essential for successful interventions.

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Notes on contributors

Karin Rechsteiner, MSc, works as a research assistant at the Department of Psychology, University of Zurich, Switzerland, and as a psychotherapist at the Department's outpatient clinic. In her current dissertation project, she investigates metaphors on trauma from a cross-cultural perspective in Brazil, India, Poland, and Switzerland.

Varsha Tol, MSc, works as a research consultant at the KEM hospital Research Centre Pune, Maharashtra, India. From 2011 till date she has been responsible for various socio-behavioral research projects on HIV/AIDS, sexual and reproductive health of women, primary prevention of child sexual abuse through the treatment of non-offending self-motivated pedophiles, violence against women, and sexuality and adolescent health.

Andreas Maercker, PhD MD, Professor and Chair at the Department of Psychology, University of Zurich, Switzerland, where he conducts research on trauma and stress-related disorders, cultural clinical psychology, e-mental health, and clinical geropsychology. From 2011 to 2018 he chaired the working group “Specifically Stress-Associated Disorders” for the revision of ICD-11 by the World Health Organization.

ORCID

Karin Rechsteiner  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4304-6848>

Varsha Tol  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9028-0170>

Andreas Maercker  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6925-3266>

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