Visible Wounds of Invisible Repression – Stress Reactivity in Victims of Political Repression

Ruth Marheinecke, Bernhard Strauss, Veronika Engert
Institute for Psychosocial Medicine, Psychotherapy and Psychoncology
Multi-centered project: Health consequences of SED-injustice

Background

Repression in the GDR1,2
- The German Democratic Republic (GDR; 1949 – 1990) was an authoritarian state strongly influenced by the Soviet Union
- The Ministry of State Security kept the population under surveillance and acted repressively towards (perceived) oppositional groups and individuals
- Other than imprisonment, political repression methods in the GDR included covert ‘quiet’ measures to avoid arousing international attention

Main criteria of quiet/non-criminal repression1
- Anonymous
- Person-centered

Long-term consequences3,4,5
- Physiological and psychological health consequences in victims (e.g., anxiety disorders, Depression, PTSD, addiction, sleeplessness)
- Psychosocial consequences: lower social support, lower socioeconomic status, higher interpersonal problems

Hypothesis: Long-term health consequences in victims of political repression are associated with dysregulations in the stress system

Example Measures1
- Systematic discrediting of public reputation
- Organizing social and professional failures
- Using anonymous phone calls, letters, or compromising photos
- Summoning of individuals to government agencies
- Causing mistrust and suspicion within groups and organizations

Methods

Target sample (N = 100):
- Repression group: n = 50
- Control group: n = 50
(matched for age, gender & origin)

Study Parts:
- Interviews - Questionnaires - TSST
- IL-6, CRP, Telomere Length - Cortisol home sampling

Trier Social Stress Test6
- 9 x Cortisol
- 9 x Subjective Stress

Changes:
- Fewer authoritative elements (no cameras, microphones, labcoats)
- Higher feeling of control (more information beforehand)
- TSST-committee acts neutral-friendly

Preliminary Results

Repression group vs. control group:
* Significantly higher subjective stress reaction to TSST (AUCI, peak-baseline, repeated measures ANOVA)
† Trend: Higher cortisol increase in response to TSST (AUCI, peak-baseline)

Discussion

Non criminal repression shares main mechanisms of severe chronic stressors6,7:
- Uncontrollability
- Anticipatory anxiety
- Uncertainty
- Social / Ego threat
- Shame induction

Stress system seems dysregulated even years after experience
- Relevant for proper health care, acknowledgement and rehabilitation of former and future victims of repression

Take Home Message

Political repression measures rooted in uncertainty, uncontrollability, and social threat can induce severe consequences on the victims, even years later. The physiological stress system appears to play a significant role in these consequences.

References: