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Development and psychometric evaluation of a new assessment method for childhood maltreatment experiences: The interview for traumatic events in childhood (ITEC)

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ABSTRACT

Objective: We conducted a comprehensive assessment of the reliability and validity of the Interview for Traumatic Events in Childhood (ITEC, Lobbestael, Arntz, Kremers, & Sieswerda, 2006), a retrospective, semi-structured interview for childhood maltreatment. The ITEC aims to yield dimensional scores for severity of experiences of different childhood maltreatment dimensions.

Methods: Initial psychometric properties were tested with the pilot version of the ITEC in 362 participants. A second study assessed the revised ITEC in 217 participants, patients and non-patients.

Results: Factor analyses produced the best fit for a five-factor model (sexual, physical and emotional abuse, physical and emotional neglect). The scales had good internal consistency, except for the physical neglect subscale, and excellent inter-rater reliability. The scales were highly associated with equivalent scales of the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (i.e., good convergent validity), and showed good correspondence with patient file information (i.e., good criterion validity).

Conclusion: These results support the reliability and validity of the ITEC, making it a potentially useful tool for assessing a broad range of traumatic events in childhood.

Practice implication: The first step in therapy for dealing with childhood maltreatment is to map abusive experiences and assess their severity and impact. Since maltreatment is a sensitive topic that is not reported on easily, trauma interviews are promising assessment instruments since they provide the opportunity to probe and clarify. There are hardly any well-validated trauma interviews available that assess the extent of maltreatment in and outside the family in various dimensions. The current study tries to fill this gap by presenting a new trauma interview; the Interview for Traumatic Events in Childhood.

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During the last decades, numerous studies have examined the effects of childhood trauma, mainly using retrospective assessment of traumatic experiences. While many early studies used retrospective trauma methods of unknown reliability and validity, several promising trauma assessment instruments have subsequently been developed, and initial findings on their reliability and validity have been reported. The most thoroughly validated and widely used retrospective trauma instrument is the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ), a self-report questionnaire that measures 3 types of abuse (i.e., physical, sexual, and emotional), and 2 types of neglect (i.e., physical and emotional) (CTQ; Bernstein & Fink, 1998). Studies in clinical and community based samples have consistently supported the reliability and validity of the CTQ, including replications of its five-factor structure (Bernstein et al., 2003; Scher, Stein, Asmundson, McCreary, & Forde, 2001), convergent and

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discriminant validity with other trauma instruments (Bernstein, Ahluvalia, Pogge, & Handelsman, 1997; Lipschitz, Bernstein, Winegar, & Southwick, 1999), and criterion-validity with independently corroborated trauma ratings (Bernstein et al., 1997, 2003).

Although questionnaires like the CTQ have the advantage of being quickly and easily administered and scored, and of affording some anonymity that might reduce the chance of social desirable responding, they are limited in comparison to retrospective trauma interviews, which can provide a richer and more detailed description of early traumatic experiences. Trauma interviews provide the opportunity to probe and clarify traumatic events. The interviewer can assess whether the experienced events can be labeled as abusive in light of an objective definition of trauma, reducing the variability caused by the interpretation of the interviewee. Interviews can include follow-up questions, for example, to fill in details about the identity of the perpetrator, age of onset and duration of the maltreatment, and specific characteristics of the abusive acts themselves. Thus, while interviews are more labor intensive than questionnaires, they provide some distinct advantages that questionnaires lack.

Several retrospective interviews for childhood trauma have been reported in the literature (e.g., Bremner, Vermetten, & Mazure, 2000; Draijer, 1989; Gallagher, Flye, Hurt, Stone, & Hull, 1992), of which the Childhood Experience of Care and Abuse (CECA, Bifulco, Brown, & Harris, 1993) and the Childhood Trauma Interview (CTI, Fink, Bernstein, Handelsman, Foote, & Lovejoy, 1995) have received the most empirical attention. Compared to many other trauma interviews, the CECA and the CTI assess a broader range of traumatic childhood events. The CECA has been extensively validated (Bifulco, Brown, & Harris, 1994; Bifulco, Brown, & Jarvis, 1997; Moran, Bifulco, Ball, Jacobs, & Benaim, 2002), while the validation of the CTI has been limited to a drug and alcohol dependent sample (Fink et al., 1995).

In the current report, we present extensive data regarding the reliability and validity of the Interview for Traumatic Events in Childhood (ITEC). The ITEC is a retrospective trauma interview developed by our group that has already been used in several published studies examining the relationship between childhood trauma and psychopathology (Arntz, Dietzel, & Dreessen, 1999; Giesen-Bloo et al., 2005; Kremers, Van Giezen, Van der Does, van Dyck, & Spinhoven, 2007; Lobbetael, Arntz, & Sieswerda, 2005). Furthermore, the study of Lobbetael, Arntz, and Bernstein (in press) validated the ITEC against personality disorders. Good test–retest reliability of the ITEC has been demonstrated by Kremers et al. (2007) in patients with Borderline Personality Disorder who were assessed before and after treatment.

The ITEC has several potential advantages that will be evaluated in this manuscript. First, the ITEC aims to assess multiple types of childhood traumatic events, including sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect. Furthermore, the ITEC is designed in such a way that it is highly likely that it determines whether experienced events correspond to objective events; it does not label these events a priori as abusive (i.e., by using questions that include the term “abuse” or other similar terms). In this way, subjective appraisal of abuse will be avoided, minimizing the chance of an interpretation bias by the respondent (Engelhard et al., in preparation). A final innovation is that the ITEC utilizes an empirically based scoring system for determining the severity of traumatic events. Each subscale yields a composite score indicating the severity of maltreatment. Severity of trauma is based on ratings by a large group of therapists and by a sample from the open population, expecting to yield more objective estimates of severity than relying on a single rater or the interviewee’s judgment.

Nonwithstanding the established psychometric properties of the CECA and CTI, their widespread use, and their comprehensive nature, the ITEC has several relative advantages compared to these interviews. First, the ITEC systematically gathers detailed information on each experienced maltreatment event based on a standard format which permits and facilitates objective scoring. Second, the ITEC inquires about witnessing maltreatment events and both the objective and subjective impact of the traumatic events on the respondent. Third, in administering the ITEC, the interviewers merely have to score detailed and objective parameters of the events (i.e., specifications of acts, perpetrators, age of onset, duration of maltreatment), while the raters of the CECA and the CTI have to decide whether respondents meet the criteria for neglect or abuse, and judge the severity of abuse, which requires extensive training of the raters, and increases the chance for subjective scoring. Fourth, all intra- and extrafamilial maltreatment experiences are inquired for in the ITEC, while the CECA only does so for sexual abuse. Thus, the ITEC differs from other interviews by the addition of parameters of maltreatment it assesses, as well as the nature of the scoring system. Finally, at this moment, the ITEC is the only trauma assessment interview published and validated in Dutch.

In this report, we first describe a study assessing the factorial structure of the first version of the ITEC (Study I). The aim of the second study was to provide a more extended psychometric assessment of the second version of the ITEC (Study II).

Study I

Method

Participants. The pilot ITEC was administered to 362 adults, including patients from several psychiatric hospitals (20.7%, $n = 75$), community mental health centres (51.6%, $n = 188$), TBS-clinics (4%, $n = 14$) and prisons (3.7%, $n = 13$) in the Netherlands and Belgium, and non-patients (20%, $n = 72$). TBS clinics are part of the Dutch forensic system and refer to forensic psychiatric hospitals for the residential treatment of mentally disordered offenders who are sentenced by criminal court to involuntary

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