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Citation for published version (APA):
Scholte, W. F. (2013). Mental health in war-affected populations

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Mental Health in War-Affected Populations

Pim Scholte

This book addresses mental health problems in populations in nonwestern war-affected regions, and methods to mitigate these problems through interventions focusing on social reintegration. It describes a number of studies among war-affected populations in widely different areas: refugees from the Rwandan genocide living in refugee camps in Tanzania, the population of a province in Afghanistan, and inhabitants of a northern district of Rwanda, respectively.

Like in other postconflict regions, mental health problems appeared to be highly prevalent in the populations studied. Therefore, mental health care should be an integral part of any emergency response and health care in postconflict regions.

Only recently has the insight been developed that humanitarian aid adopts a public-health approach and be community-based rather than focus on specific trauma complaints through specialized care. This constitutes a marked change in the thinking about care to populations affected by war and oppression.

The research findings presented in this book corroborate these insights. In addition, these studies constitute a major contribution to the evolution of an effective psychosocial support program based on these premises. The second intervention program described here primarily aims at social reintegration and bonding. It has been running in Rwanda from 2006 onwards, and has reached thousands of beneficiaries. It appears to positively affect both social bonding and mental health.

The studies in this book provide us with important new insights, indicating a new direction for future community-based psychosocial intervention programs for populations living in war-affected regions.

Pim Scholte is a psychiatrist and the director of Equator Foundation, an agency providing mental health care to survivors of mass violence and torture, and to victims of human trafficking in the Netherlands. He is affiliated with the Academic Medical Center at the University of Amsterdam, and a senior researcher at the Arq Psychotrauma Expert Group.