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Dissociation and Memory for Neutral and Traumatic Stories

Bridget Klest, MA
Jennifer J. Freyd, PhD
UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

Introduction

Background

•Previous research has consistently found a positive correlation between history of trauma and dissociation.

•Recent research (Becker-Blease, Freyd, & Pears, 2004; DePrince and Freyd, 1999; 2004) suggests that people who score high on a measure of dissociation may have enhanced abilities at dividing attention and suppressing traumatic information from consciousness.

•These findings are consistent with Betrayal Trauma Theory (Freyd, 1996) which states that in some cases it may be adaptive to remain unaware of trauma and trauma cues, and that this is likely accomplished using dissociation.

•The current study set out to replicate these findings using more complex stimuli than have been used previously.

Method

• Fifty-two subjects, half scoring high and half low on the Dissociative Experiences Scale, watched neutral videos while listening to neutral and trauma related stories.

Participants

52 undergraduate psychology students

- 32 women, 20 men
- 26 high dissociators (DES > 20), 26 low dissociators (DES < 10)
- 83% White, 17% Minority

Materials

DES: Dissociative Experiences Scale (Carlson & Putnam, 1993); a 28-item self-report measure of common and uncommon dissociative experiences

BBTS: Brief Betrayal Trauma Survey, (Goldberg & Freyd, 2003); a 24-item survey of traumas occurring in childhood and adulthood

Stories: 25 two-minute audio-recorded stories, presented through headphones, either neutral or traumatic content

Videos: 5 two-minute "how-to" videos (e.g., bicycle repair, napkin folding)
Memory tests for story details: 7 comprehension questions about each story

Procedures

•Participants were selected based on DES scores.

•Each participant heard 5 randomly-selected stories.

•Each story was randomly paired with a neutral video, and attended to both the video and the story being presented.

•Following each story, participants were tested on memory for details of the story.

•Participants were administered the BBTS.

Descriptive Statistics

Dissociation Group	DES average
High	M = 33.61, SD = 9.08
Low	M = 3.74, SD = 1.96

Correlation: DES and trauma (BBTS), r (N = 52) = .40, p < .01.

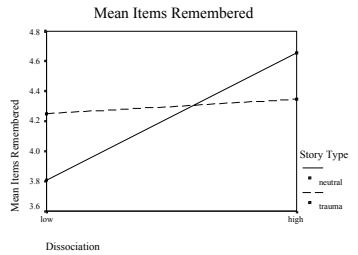

Figure 1. There is a significant interaction between dissociation and story type.

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Please address correspondence to:
Bridget Klest, MA
Department of Psychology
1227 University of Oregon
Eugene OR 97403-1227
bklest@dynamic.uoregon.edu

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Results

Descriptives

There was a moderate positive correlation between dissociation as measured by the DES and trauma as measured by the BBTS, r (N = 52) = .40, p < .01.

Results

To test whether dissociation related to differential remembering of trauma vs. neutral stimuli, difference scores were calculated by subtracting neutral story average scores from trauma story average scores. This interaction was significant, t (50) = 1.72, p < .05 (one-tailed).

Discussion

Summary of Findings

High dissociators remembered significantly more than low dissociators when listening to neutral stories, and performed no differently than low dissociators when listening to trauma related stories.

Although the actual pattern of results is somewhat different from previous research, this can likely be accounted for by the confounding of attention and memory in this study. Previous research has assessed attention and memory separately, and because attention to a stimulus is related to memory for it, our memory measure may have assessed a combination of the two. Taking this into account these findings are consistent with previous research, and suggest that attention may be an important factor in determining how dissociation affects memory performance. Further research should be conducted on this topic.

Future Directions

Use distracter stimuli presented in the same modality as target stimuli, i.e., stories and distracters both presented in audio format

More ecologically valid distracter stimuli, e.g. voices in a crowd

Careful assessment of attention to both the target stimuli (stories) and the distracter stimuli

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