

# TSS GROUP NEWS

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## December News Highlights

Anne P. DePrince, Ph.D.  
TSS Group Director

What does a dragon have to do with December news? You'll just have to read on to find out!



Before we get to dragons, a few exciting announcements. Dr. **Ann Chu** (PhD '08) has been appointed Clinical Assistant Professor in our very own DU Department of Psychology. We look forward to welcoming Ann back to DU in March, 2010. Following a postdoc at the UC-San Francisco, Ann brings back to DU extensive clinical and research experience working with very young children and their families exposed to trauma using an empirically-supported model developed by Dr. Alicia Lieberman.

**Ryan Matlow** received two grants for research he has proposed to do on revictimization risk. The awards were made by the International Society for the Study of Trauma and Dissociation and the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies.

**Claire Hebenstreit, Courtney Mitchell, Ryan Matlow, and Rheena Pineda** presented posters on cutting edge research at the Annual Meeting of the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies (Atlanta, GA). Claire, Ryan, and Rheena each presented on preliminary findings from the Women's Health Study, with emphasis on ethics; PTSD and revictimization; and appraisal processes respectively. (Please see page 3 for details about new research on participants' perceptions of the

research process in this study!) Courtney presented on qualitative analyses of survivors' narratives describing feelings, beliefs, and behaviors following different traumatic events. Watch for more information about all of these studies in upcoming newsletters!

In November, I had the great pleasure of visiting **National Taiwan University** in Taipei, Taiwan to meet with colleagues (including **Dr. Y.Y. Yeh** and **Chui-De Chiu**) who are doing exciting research on trauma and dissociation. After a day of wonderfully engaging meetings about our respective research efforts, I was delighted to have the opportunity to present some of our research to more than 120 faculty and students. Afterwards, I had the chance to explore Taipei - from colorful dragons to amazing food. We look forward to collaborations with our new colleagues in Taiwan!



Anne presents research at National Taiwan University.

We wish you a very happy and healthy holiday season - and we look forward to working with you in 2010. As always, thank you for all you do.

Anne P. DePrince, Ph.D.

Director, TSS Group  
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### ALSO INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Meet our Newest TSS Group Member	2
<b>NEW FINDINGS:</b> Survivors' Perceptions of Research Process	3



## Rheena Helps Us Get to Know Jane Sundermann!

*By Rheena Pineda, M.A.*

*5<sup>th</sup> year graduate student*

### **Rheena's Question (Q): Tell us about yourself**

**Jane's Answer (A):** I am a proud Midwesterner, born and raised in St. Louis, MO. At age 18, I traveled south to Texas for school at Rice University. There, I developed a passion for psychology through my coursework as well as volunteer work with Rice's Center for Civic Engagement, which consistently exposed me to mental health issues in my community. Last year, I solidified my commitment to a research career in psychology during my experience working at the Washington University Alzheimer's Disease Research Center in my hometown of St. Louis.

I'm loving the active culture in Denver so far and I love partaking in outdoor activities in my free time. I'm an avid runner, so Colorado's trails have already been a fun challenge for me.

### **Q: What are your current research interests?**

**A:** Generally, I am interested in how individuals respond to stressors, particularly experiences of violence and other trauma. I want to investigate certain coping techniques that may protect against the negative mental health outcomes often seen in trauma victims. Specifically, I'm very interested in the role that executive function (EF) processes may play in coping and how mindfulness-based cognitive interventions could target such processes to improve outcomes for individuals. I am very excited about current projects we have underway to deliver and test the effects of such interventions within at-risk adolescent populations.

### **Q: What drew you to the TSS group?**

**A:** Initially, I was impressed by the group's specific research goals as well as their strong links to the Denver community. Through my community service work at Rice, I interacted with individuals who had



**Jane Sundermann**, our newest TSS Group member, enjoys the fall colors on the DU campus... before the snow, that is!

experienced stressors such as domestic violence and I was excited to learn that this kind of research was being done at DU. Furthermore, my work at WashU introduced me to aspects of cognition like executive functioning that I learned that the TSS group was examining in relation to trauma, and I found this so interesting! My interview weekend really sealed my belief that the TSS group would be a great fit, as I immediately recognized the group's friendliness and cohesiveness. I am so thankful to be a part of this supportive environment.

### **Q: What do you hope to accomplish in the TSS group?**

**A:** Learn as much as possible and make some unique contributions! I am excited to continue to ask questions about the effects of trauma and to provide good care for individuals who have experienced it. I hope to discover new pieces to the puzzle of disorders like PTSD, specifically through studying executive functioning and how it may be affected by mindfulness-based cognitive intervention. Finally, I hope to improve upon my ability to communicate such findings to the broader world through publication and presentation. Given the qualities I've observed in my colleagues, I am confident that I will meet these goals and develop great research and clinical skills throughout my work here.





## Survivors' Perceptions of the Research Process

By *Claire Hebenstreit*

*3<sup>rd</sup> year graduate student*

Research participants report both positive and negative aspects of their participation in trauma research. For example, during the course of answering questions about traumatic events, participants may experience emotional upset or recall unpleasant memories. Participants may also have positive reactions to research, such as a sense of empowerment, feelings of altruism, and insight into their own feelings and reactions in response to traumatic events. Studies have shown that in general, most participants in trauma research perceive the benefits of participation to be greater than the drawbacks. Ethical standards point to the importance of a positive benefit-to-cost ratio.

Because the benefit-to-cost ratio is such an important ethical consideration, we monitor closely participants' responses to our research in all of our studies. Recently, we took a close look at the factors that influence participants' perceptions and experiences in a longitudinal study of women exposed to intimate partner violence (IPV) in the Women's Health Study. Specifically, we wondered: what motivates women to participate in trauma research? What impact do these motivations have on participants' experience of the research process and decision to participate in subsequent testing sessions?

Women recruited into the Women's Health Study were not told in advance that the study focused on IPV because of safety concerns; rather, they were told that they would be asked to answer questions regarding physical health and emotions as well as stressful life events, such as exposure to crimes and violence. When

**Editor's Note:** This article describes research done in partnership with Drs. **Joanne Belknap** and **Angela Gover** and the **Triage Outreach Team**. The research was supported by Award No. 2007-WG-BX-0002 awarded by the **National Institute of Justice**, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this poster are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice. The views expressed in this article do not necessarily represent those of the National Institute of Justice.

women arrived for their interviews, they were informed that one purpose of the study was to understand what helps women who have experienced IPV. They were then given the opportunity to decline to participate in the study, while still receiving the promised compensation.

The recruitment strategy gives us a unique opportunity to study the ethics of trauma research. In the larger literature on responses to research participation, most studies have relied on people who have self-selected into the study knowing that the focus is trauma - thus, people may be "ready" to talk about the trauma and therefore less likely to be negatively affected by the experience. One unique aspect of our study was that, due to safety concerns, women did not know in advance that they would be asked to talk about IPV; therefore, the decision to come for an initial visit was not influenced by knowledge of the study topic.

During the first interview, we asked women questions about their experiences, thoughts, and feelings regarding the arrest incident and subsequent law enforcement response, as well as factors that were helpful and unhelpful in dealing

*Ethics, continued page 4*



To read about other ethics research from the TSS Group, you can access full-text articles at our website:

<http://mysite.du.edu/~adeprinc/pub.html>

*Ethics*, continued from page 3

with the incident. Women were also asked about their physical and emotional health as well as their trauma histories, including IPV with past romantic partners.

To get a detailed look at perceptions of experiences in the study, we asked women to complete the Response to Research Participation Questionnaire (RRPQ, Newman & Kaloupek), which has 5 scales that tap both negative and positive aspects of research participation.

At the first visit, RRPQ scores indicated that participants viewed the positive aspects of study participation as significantly greater than the negative aspects, resulting in a positive benefit-to-cost ratio. We found that greater posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptom severity was associated greater perceived positive aspects of participation, including personal benefits, benefits to others, and general beliefs about the value of trauma research. Greater PTSD and dissociative symptoms were both associated with greater emotion during participation. RRPQ scores were *not* related to the reported severity of the arrest incident.

After women finished their first study visit, they were invited to come back for two more visits over the course of one year. Of the 236 women we interviewed, 205 women (87%) returned for at least one of the follow up interviews. This high retention rate suggests that, even after completing a lengthy interview that focused on traumatic and potentially upsetting experiences, most women were willing to return for additional visits. We also found that over the course of three assessments, the women continued to report that the benefits outweighed the costs of participation.

At the first and second visits, greater PTSD and dissociation symptom severity were both

associated with participants' reports of greater emotional reactions during the study. However, greater emotional reactions are not necessarily bad or negative. In fact, greater symptoms were also at times related to greater perceived benefits. In addition, reports of increased emotional reactions were also related to reports of less regret about having participated in the study. Further, greater emotion was not linked to lower retention; people who reported feeling emotional during the study were no less likely to return for future visits.



Claire presented on ethics research at the Annual Meeting of the **International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies** in November.

In the absence of empirical evidence, it would be easy to assume that discussing trauma and violence (particularly as the severity of violence increases) will necessarily be overwhelmingly negative for participants; and that women who report greater violence severity will be more likely to perceive participation negatively and to decline to return for future visits. However, the current study demonstrates that violence severity is unrelated to retention and to perceptions of the research experience among women exposed to IPV.

These data demonstrate that researchers can ask important questions about trauma and violence in such a way that the benefits to survivors outweigh the costs. We take very seriously our commitment to providing a supportive environment for participants and look forward to additional research that will allow us to continue to better understand and improve participants' experiences.

