TSS GROUP NEWS

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February News Highlights

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

2008 ended on a celebratory note as one of our own, **Melody Combs**, defended her dissertation and graduated. In this issue, Dr. Combs offers an encore to her time in our research group by reporting on findings from her dissertation study that examined victim blame.

We are delighted to report that 2009 has started with a flurry of research activity. We are in the process of analyzing data from several studies and look forward to reporting new findings to you soon. We've been on the road reporting on some of our research (see TSS Group Achievements). At an international conference in Chicago, for example, we presented two papers linking

posttraumatic symptoms to feelings of alienation. We think that these findings have important implications for thinking about social support as part of interventions. We look forward to sharing more about these findings with you soon.

As always, we also look forward to finding new ways to work with you. Thank you for all of the work you do on behalf of victims and survivors.

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

In each newsletter, we try to offer you links to electronic, trauma-related research resources.

The National Center for Child Traumatic Stress has a new electronic book, "**Trauma-Informed Interventions: Clinical and Research Evidence and Culture-Specific Information Project**" available at http://learn.nctsn.org. To access the book, create a username and password at http://learn.nctsn.org. Next, click "Special Topics" and then "Trauma-Informed Interventions".

Several professional societies dealing with trauma and violence have valuable resources and/or newsletters available at their websites. Check out the **American Psychological Association's Division 56 (Trauma Psychology)** newsletter at http://www.apatraumadivision.org/newsletter.php. And the **International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies** at http://www.istss.org.

Looking for electronic resources –
let us know! Email:
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Examining Victim Blame

Melody Combs, Ph.D.

When a person discloses experiences of trauma, such as sexual assault, positive responses from others are linked to positive outcomes (Lepore et al., 2000) while negative responses (such as **victim blame**) are linked to detrimental outcomes, including depression and poor coping (Major et al., 1990). With the long-term goal of decreasing victim blame and its consequences, we set out to better understand the conditions under which blame happens. So, we asked: what environmental and personal factors affect the likelihood that someone will blame a sexual assault victim?

To answer this question, we invited undergraduate volunteers to read a news story about a female who was sexually assaulted. Unbeknownst to the participants, the story was fictional. Participants saw one of four different versions of the story. Half of the participants read a story set at the University of Denver; while other read a story set at Kempton University. Thus, half of the participants read about someone in their "in-group" (i.e., also went to DU) while the remaining participants read about someone in an "out-group". Half of the participants read that many sexual assaults had occurred in the previous year; others read that none had been reported. Therefore, participants varied in whether they read that the environment was relatively dangerous or safe.

By manipulating whether participants thought the female was an in- or out-group member (i.e., a student at DU or not) and how dangerous the environment was (i.e., dangerous versus safe), we were able to test how these factors influenced victim blame. We also looked at participants' own gender, beliefs about the justness of the world, trauma history, and self-blame.

After reading the story, participants were asked to answer questions about the female in the story. Because asking people directly whether they blamed the woman would pull for socially desirable responses (that is, people might be embarrassed to admit they blamed her), we asked them to simply check words from a list that described the woman in the story. The words were positive (e.g., intelligent, dependable) or derogating (e.g., irresponsible, immature). We also asked participants to rate how much they agreed with several behavioral statements to assess blame. For example, "she acted in a very irresponsible manner". When the study was over, we told participants that the story was fictional and provided them with accurate information about sexual assault reports.

> So, we asked: what environmental and personal factors affect the likelihood that someone will blame a sexual assault victim?

Female participants who read the story about a female at DU chose more praise words to describe the victim than females who read the story about another school. However, male participants showed the opposite pattern: they were more likely to praise the victim who went to another school than the victim who went to DU. This finding may reflect differential relationship-building/competition strategies across females and males. Specifically, females may be more interested in building relationships with similar individuals, thus praising them more than dissimilar individuals; while males feel more competitive toward similar individuals,

thus praising them less than dissimilar individuals.

Participants who read that the environment in which the assault took place was relatively safe (i.e., no other victimizations occurred in the last year) attributed more praise to the victim compared to participants who received information that the environment was relatively dangerous (i.e., many other victimizations occurred that year). This finding may reflect a should-have-known-better viewpoint in which observers will be less apt to

> Participants assigned more blame to the victim if they believed that the world and their own fate were controllable.

acknowledge positive characteristics (i.e., intelligence, conscientiousness) in victims who are assaulted in a known dangerous setting. Participants may have believed that individuals assaulted in a safe environment could not have known better, and therefore still used good judgment in that environment.

Participants assigned more blame to the victim if they believed that the world and their own fate were controllable. This finding is consistent with predictions made by just world theory (Lerner, 1980), in that bystanders blame victims in order to preserve a belief that the world is meaningful, and that people get what they deserve in life. Contrary to predictions made by just world theory, the greater the extent to which participants endorsed a belief that the world and the people in it are good, the less likely they were to blame and derogate the victim, suggesting that this belief actually leads to a more lenient view of the deservingness and bad

character of victims of traumatic events. Eighty-eight percent of participants reported exposure to one or more potentially-traumatic event. As the number of traumas to which participants were exposed increased, so too did their tendency to offer *more* praise and *less* derogation of the victim. These findings fit with the World Assumptions Theory (Janoff-Bulman, 1989). The theory posits that people hold on to assumptions that the world is just and controllable, and that the world and the people in it are good. People who hold these assumptions may derogate a victim in order to maintain their beliefs in the inherent controllability and goodness of the world. However, the theory argues that trauma shatters these basic assumptions. Thus, participants exposed to multiple traumas may have little need to derogate the victim to maintain assumptions of controllability and goodness in the world.

Interestingly, the more that participants blamed themselves for their own trauma exposures, the more negatively they responded to the victim in the story.

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As research progresses in this field, we may be able to identify mechanisms that decrease victim blame. However, a major challenge to decreasing victim blame may be that individual differences seem to matter (e.g., beliefs about the world as well as trauma exposure). That is, while contextual factors can be addressed in how information is presented to victims (e.g., news reports could stress contextual factors that might decrease victim blame), individual

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differences may be particularly difficult to over-ride as observers respond to victims. The finding that victim-derogation associations were related to less blame suggests the possibility that, among other factors, increasing awareness of blame may help decrease victim blame.

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Details in memory for traumatic events: A preview of upcoming research!
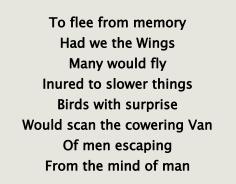
Courtney Mitchell, 2nd year Graduate Student

Memory for trauma has long captivated the interests of myriad professionals – from researchers and clinicians to lawyers and artists. One dimension of memory that has garnered attention is **memory for details**. Researchers have taken many approaches to studying the type and amount of memory detail people report for emotionally arousing and traumatic events.

For example, researchers who study "flashbulb" memories – that is, high profile events such as the Kennedy Assassination or the Challenger explosion – have focused on **contextual details** (e.g., *time, location, activities, others present, informant*). Some studies suggest that personal involvement in high profile events (such as the September 11th attacks) leads to *more* detailed memories than might occur by simply being exposed to such an event through T.V. or news reports (Neisser et al., 1996). In contrast, other research indicates that those geographically closest and most affected by such events may actually retain *fewer* of these autobiographical details (Pezdek, 2003).

Unlike flashbulb memory research, research on directly-experienced traumatic events (e.g.,

assault, combat) has tended to focus on **sensory specific details** (e.g., *sights, sounds, smell*) associated with intrusive memories of the event (for a review, see Berntsen et al., 2003). Most trauma and memory researchers, especially those focusing on

> To flee from memory
> Had we the Wings
> Many would fly
> Inured to slower things
> Birds with surprise
> Would scan the cowering Van
> Of men escaping
> From the mind of man
>
> *"To flee from memory",*
> *by Emily Dickinson*

populations with high rates of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), have emphasized that traumatic memories involve more sensory-specific detailed reliving of the event than memories for other types of events (e.g., Berntsen et al., 2003; Ehlers & Clark, 2000). Some have even suggested that traumatic memories may contain very little non-sensory detail (Ehlers & Clark, 2000). However, descriptions of non-sensory specific detail have been found in written

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trauma narratives (Hellawell & Brewin, 2004). Although involuntary, vivid sensory impressions of traumatic events are thought to be quite common, especially among those with PTSD (Berntsen et al., 2003; Ehlers & Clark, 2000), traumatic memories may not always be rich in sensory detail. For example, women's rape memories contained less visual detail than other unpleasant memories (Tromp et al., 1995).

Other memory researchers have emphasized a distinction between **central** and **peripheral details**, suggesting that memory for central details may be enhanced for traumas, while memory for peripheral details may be impaired (Berntsen, 2002). This is sometimes referred to as the *weapon focus effect* (Loftus et al., 1987 – that is, the ability of crime victims to recall the details of a gun but not the facial features or clothing of the assailant). Some research indicates that reports of central details in traumatic memories may be more stable over time than peripheral details (Herlihy et al., 2002).

In spite of this knowledge base, we still know relatively little about the specific **person and event variables** that influence memory details. That is, what characteristics of the event itself, or attributes of the person, influence memory for details? Memory models from both the autobiographical and trauma memory literatures provide frameworks for identifying key factors.

For example, Ehlers and Clark's Cognitive Model of PTSD (2000) suggests that ongoing negative appraisals of the traumatic event will lead to greater access of (primarily) sensory–specific detail (that is, sights, sounds, smells). Common trauma related negative appraisals include: "nowhere is safe"; "the next disaster will strike soon"; "my body is ruined"; "I deserve the bad things that happen to

me" (Ehlers & Clark, 2000, pg. 322). Negative appraisals in the aftermath of the traumatic event may also be associated with negative emotions such as guilt, shame, sadness, betrayal, humiliation and anger (Ehlers & Clark, 2000; Brewin et al., 2003).

Ehlers and Clark's model suggests a reciprocal relationship between detail in traumatic memories and negative appraisals of the traumatic event and its aftermath. Specifically, the model predicts that negative appraisals of the event will result in perceptions of continued threat and maintenance of reexperiencing symptoms (including intrusive sensory–specific memories of the event). Ehlers and Clark suggest that, especially for those who meet criteria for PTSD, retrieval of sensory specific details will likely be involuntary, frequent, and largely cue driven (that is, trauma–relevant reminders trigger memories). Even when external reminders of the event can be avoided, internal reminders (including rumination on negative appraisals or negative emotions) may continue to trigger intrusive details.

Ehlers and Clark's model also emphasizes that details may eventually become less accessible. Their model suggests that as the narrative of the traumatic event becomes more coherent and integrated with other autobiographical knowledge, as may happen naturally over time or over the course of therapy, the original sensory details may fade. Thus, the model suggests that the amount of detail in memories for traumatic events may be a function of PTSD symptoms. Access to detail may lessen with the process of recovery.

To further our understanding of memory for details, we are using models of autobiographical (e.g., Conway & Pleydell–Pearce, 2000) and trauma specific (e.g., Brewin et al., 1996; Ehlers & Clark, 2000) memory to make predictions about memory for trauma–related details. In collaboration with Dr. Danny McIntosh, we will

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examine how positive (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) and negative (*shame, self-blame, etc.*, Newman, Riggs, and Roth, 1997) themes in semi-structured interviews relate to the number and type of memory details trauma survivors reported for the events. We will also examine how the type of event (e.g., events involving high versus low betrayal; see Freyd, 1996) and symptoms relate to memory detail. Check back in future issues for our findings! 🌿

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TSS Group Achievements

Melody Combs defended her dissertation and graduates (Dec., 2008). Congratulations, Dr. Combs!

DePrince's Service Learning Class (that has involved partners at **WINGS, Denver District Attorney's Office, SafeHouse Denver, and Denver Children's Advocacy Center**) was featured in DU's Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning (CCESL) newsletter. Visit CCESL at http://www.du.edu/engage.

In November, **Ann Chu, Rheena Pineda, Claire Hebenstreit,** and **Anne DePrince** presented papers at the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies in Chicago. Visit http://www.istss.org.

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