

# TSS GROUP NEWS



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## March/April News



### Highlights

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

Greetings from the TSS Group! We're keeping busy (so busy that the March newsletter is reaching you in April, but who's counting?), with data collection and analyses. As you'll read, we continue to invite young women to participate in the Healthy Adolescent Relationship Project (HARP). HARP is designed for teen girls and young women (ages 12–19) who have had contact with the child welfare system and are at high risk of revictimization because of previous exposure to violence/abuse in childhood. We anticipate that this study will provide important information about effective ways to work with young women around revictimization risk. To learn more about HARP, please visit <http://mysite.du.edu/~adeprinc/harp.html>.

As you may know, we are also getting the word out about two other studies. Latina mothers are invited to participate in the SALUD DE LA FAMILIA, a study focused on understanding the impact of acculturative stress and domestic violence on Latina women and their children. To learn more, please visit <http://mysite.du.edu/~adeprinc/study.html>; flyers are available at the end of this newsletter.

Third, our colleagues at the University of Colorado Boulder are inviting adult women (ages 22–30) to participate in the CU BRAIN STUDY, a project examining child abuse exposure in relation to attention and memory performance. Please visit <http://mysite.du.edu/~adeprinc/cubrainstudy.pdf>, email [cubrainstudy@gmail.com](mailto:cubrainstudy@gmail.com), or call (303) 735–5421. A study flyer is available at the end of this newsletter.

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We're also diligently analyzing data – so much so that we're pleased to **report preliminary findings from 3 separate studies** for you in this issue! One study focuses on women exposed to intimate partner abuse; a second on youth in residential treatment; and a third on media reporting of domestic violence cases. We'll keep you posted as articles related to these findings are submitted for publication – in the meantime, we're pleased to give you this preview!

I'd like to take a moment to extend a special note of thanks to the **Rape Assistance and Awareness Program** for partnering with my Research Methods Class (Psyc 3050) to allow the students to do a community-engaged research project. I look forward to reporting more on this in an upcoming newsletter.

Finally, I am pleased to announce that **Tejas Srinivas** will join us next year as a first year graduate student. We'll introduce Tejas to you in more depth this fall when she arrives on campus!

*Anne P. DePrince, Ph.D.*  
Director, TSS Group  
Associate Professor, University of Denver



## Preliminary Data about Women's Police-reporting Decisions

Courtney Mitchell, 4<sup>th</sup> year Graduate Student

Research indicates that many incidents of intimate partner violence (IPA) are not reported (Johnson, 1990; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Actual reporting rates vary across studies, ranging from 20–68% (Bonami, Holt, Martin, & Thompson, 2006; Coulter, Huehne, Byers, & Alfonso, 1999; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000; Rennison & Welchans, 2000). Low reporting rates for IPA are a concern because women's decisions to report intimate partner violence to the police can affect access to justice and victim services, including mental health services. In addition, understanding why victims decide to turn away from the system is pertinent to policy formation.

At our December "Returning Research to the Community Event", we presented preliminary findings from our Denver Triage Project. We are currently preparing to submit these findings for publication review, in partnership with our collaborators.

As you may recall, the Denver Triage Project involved women who had an incident of IPA reported to the police, which we called the target incident. If, during the course of the 1-year study, women experienced additional incidents of IPA, we asked if they reported those incidents to the police. We then coded women's responses to try to understand how they thought about these reporting decisions.

The preliminary findings suggest that women who have already had experiences with the legal system have clear reasons for choosing not to report additional incidents of IPA. Almost half (47%) of women we interviewed said they did not report the abuse because of being dissatisfied with the criminal justice system. For example, women reported that: *"he would go to jail and get right back out", "...they issue a warrant and they pick him up and he gets right back out...so what is the point of reporting?"* and *"involvement with the courts is a pain."*

Thirty-nine percent of respondents felt the incident was

not serious enough or were concerned that they would not be taken seriously. For example, women said: *"I don't think it was serious enough or a big deal, wasn't sure I would be taken seriously by the police; he has a military background so I thought the police would find him more believable..."*, and *"I thought I wouldn't be believed because we were in a relationship."* Potential negative consequences for her and/or her children was also described as a reason for not reporting by 23%. For example, women stated that they did not report violence to the police because they were worried about being arrested, losing their job, and losing custody of their children.

Love and desire for the offender was reported by 22% to be a reason why they did not report abuse to the police. For example, one woman said that she did not call the police for subsequent violence because: *"I guess I just loved him too much, I love him and he's the father of my kids -- no matter what has happened, we've been there for each other through thick and thin, and sometimes people have problems, but well, I know his dad hit on him, and I understand that."* Another woman said she did not report violence to the police because *"...he is a tiny man and they would tear him up in jail, I have compassion for him, I love him even though he is an idiot."*

Eight percent said that they were afraid of the offender and therefore did not report the abuse. One woman said that she did not report because she was *"scared of what he will do."* Similarly, another woman said that she did not report to the police because of *"not knowing what he would do in response, scared."* To illustrate the degree to which being afraid prevented women from reporting to the police, one woman said that she *"didn't call the police previously because I thought he would hurt me and kill me."* Eighty-seven percent of women cited at least one of these five reasons for not reporting IPA.

We are also examining predictors of women's reporting decisions, specifically indicators of subjective and objective

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dependence. Our early findings suggest that case characteristics (e.g., severity of abuse), demographic variables (e.g., age, minority status), and subjective indicators of dependence (e.g., self-reported financial and physical dependence) do not predict reporting behavior. However, objective indicators of dependence (e.g., SES) *do* predict reporting behavior, such that women with lower SES (i.e., more dependence), are less likely to report incidents.

These results suggest greater objective dependence on the perpetrator is linked to decrease likelihood of engaging in help-seeking behavior. Poverty (e.g., low income, limited education, and poor job opportunities) may have a pervasive impact on women survivors because of associated dependence. Consistent with betrayal trauma theory, subjective indicators of dependence were largely unrelated to objective indicators, suggesting some degree of unawareness of dependence. We continue to try to understand factors associated with reporting behavior in an effort to determine how the criminal justice system can best meet women's needs.

In addition, we are excited to invite back women from the Triage project for an additional (Time 4) interview. As a component of this Time 4 interview we will examine women's responses to different types of domestic violence public service ads. We hope this information will assist us in better understanding what types of public service ads are most effective for women with a history of IPA.

#### References

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## TSS Group Achievements

**Anne DePrince** has been appointed Director of the Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning (CCESL). She continues her appointment in Psychology, where she does research on violence against women and children. This additional position, supported by release from some teaching duties, connects Anne to her passions in terms of community engagement at DU. To learn more about CCESL, please visit their [website](#).

A new chapter on betrayal trauma theory and memory, co-authored with DePrince, is now [available](#).

In February, we heard terrific news from the internship match (which is much like the residency match in which medical doctors participate): **Rheena Pineda** will begin her pre-doctoral internship this summer at The Children's Hospital, Denver. Congratulations, Rheena!



### Information on the Healthy Adolescent Relationship Project (HARP)

We are pleased to invite teen girls (ages 12-19) who have come to the attention of the child welfare system to participate in the HARP study.

- Teens participate in a prevention group at no cost.
- Food will be provided during group meetings.

Are teens compensated for their time?

- Teens receive \$40/research evaluation for up to 4 research evaluations (up to \$160 total).

What about transportation?

- Study activities take place at DU. DU is accessible by light rail and multiple bus routes (e.g., 21,24).
- Teens receive \$10/appointment to offset transportation costs.

For more information:

- Call 303.871.4103 or email [harp@du.edu](mailto:harp@du.edu).
- To download study flyers, please visit: <http://mysite.du.edu/~adeprinc/study.html>



## Missed Opportunities in Colorado Newspapers

*By Jenna Lindsay-Brisbin  
Honors Student*

As an undergraduate research assistant in the TSS Group, I had a wonderful opportunity to work on a project for the Social Change Committee of the Denver Domestic Violence Coordinating Council. The committee was interested to know how incidents of domestic violence (DV) are reported in Colorado newspapers, in order to present the most accurate information to journalists themselves. For many people, newspaper reports may be their only source of information about domestic violence. Consequently, newspapers present a unique opportunity to educate the public about domestic violence, and the effects it has on individuals, as well as our society as a whole. At the same time, newspapers also have a unique influence on reader's ideas about domestic violence, and if unhelpful or inaccurate information about domestic violence is perpetuated through newspapers many people may understand these myths as fact.

We examined newspaper reports of domestic violence published in Colorado during 2008. Specifically, we considered the presence of domestic violence myths, educational information and community resources provided, and characteristics of the incidents that are most often reported. In total, we examined 187 articles from various Colorado newspapers, including popular daily newspapers (i.e. The Denver Post, Rocky Mountain News, and Colorado Springs Gazette), as well as smaller, more rural newspapers (i.e. The Longmont Times-Call and Douglas County News-Press).

One consistent theme throughout our examination was homogeneity among articles. Only 10% of the articles were categorized as "proactive," indicating that it was written with the intention of educating the public about some aspect of domestic violence. This could include information about the prevalence or causes of domestic violence, its effect on the community, or community organizations that can assist. In contrast, 90% of the articles were categorized as "reactive" in that they reported only the facts of a specific incident or case, with little to no educational information.

With regard to the specific incidents described, 48% of

articles reported a domestic violence homicide, and 58% reported a non-fatal domestic violence incident. The defendants or suspects presented in the articles were 82% male and 13% female (5% unknown). Perhaps most compelling, 100% of the couples described were heterosexual couples.

Contrary to what we expected, myths were somewhat rare. Of all articles, 34% contained at least one myth. Some of the most common myths included: the victim is somehow responsible or to blame for the incident (13%), alcohol or drug use excuses domestic violence (9%), and the offender's uncontrollable anger excuses domestic violence (6%). Although myths were generally low, educational information and mentions of community resources were lower. Only 9% of articles contained any kind of educational information about domestic violence, and within the reactive articles, only 2% contained any educational information. Educational information could include: ways to prevent domestic violence, causes of domestic violence, the effect of domestic violence on children, other general information about the nature of domestic violence, etc. In total, 8% of articles mentioned community resources that could help victims, children, or friends and family members affected by domestic violence.

Articles also reported little about the community's response to the incident. Only 9% of articles mentioned other instances of domestic violence in the community or put the incident in the context of a larger social issue, and only 12% of articles reported that the larger community (beyond friends and neighbors) responded to the DV incident.

In short, our examination indicates that newspaper reporting of domestic violence is a missed opportunity to educate readers about the complexities of domestic violence, and include many shortcomings in reporting. Newspapers publish reactive articles, which typically report a single, specific crime, far more frequently than proactive articles, which aim to educate readers or promote community resources (i.e. nonprofits, shelters). Although

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the majority of Colorado newspaper reports of domestic violence incidents do not overtly perpetuate common myths about domestic violence, even fewer articles contain information to educate the general public or promote greater understanding of domestic violence. Similarly, newspapers also miss opportunities to educate by rarely including information from domestic violence and mental health experts, victim advocates, or other professionals when reporting on DV incidents. Instead, articles rely primarily on police reports. Further, articles may go so far as to mislead their readership by failing to report incidents of domestic violence among non-heterosexual couples, and by reporting more domestic violence homicides than non-fatal incidents. Finally, by

neglecting to mention the response of the community to domestic violence incidents, articles fail to point out continuity between different incidents and ignore the impact of DV on the entire community.

In sum, newspapers reach a vast population through their readership, but unfortunately they are missing opportunities to provide educational information about the nature of DV and associated resources. It is our hope that the information compiled in this project will be used to inform actual change in Colorado journalists' reporting of domestic violence incidents, so that the opportunities for education are not missed..



## Understanding the Complex Relationships between Victimization and Cognitive Flexibility

By Kristin Weinzierl, PhD

Recently, a multi-year study about victimization and cognitive flexibility came to a conclusion. The study, completed in collaboration with the **Denver Children's Home**, examined the complex relationships among trauma severity, family violence status, PTSD severity, and cognitive flexibility. The study was designed to address limitations in previous research by examining trauma severity as a continuum and by more carefully evaluating the role of IQ. Results begin to shed light on the relative roles of trauma variables in predicting executive functioning and problem-solving.

Seventy-seven adolescents being treated at the Denver Children's Home, along with 21 of their parents, participated in the study. Adolescents worked one-on-one with an examiner to complete five cognitive flexibility tasks, a test of flexible problem-solving (similar to real-world situations in which flexibility might be required), and a questionnaire assessing trauma exposure and PTSD symptoms. Parents and DCH records contributed additional information about trauma exposure and demographics. Four of the cognitive flexibility tasks loaded onto a single factor in principle components analysis. Trauma severity was computed by

creating a composite of age of earliest onset and number of exposures.

Adolescents were reported to have experienced a range of traumas, including accidents, natural disasters, physical and sexual abuse, witnessing domestic violence, and victimization by non-family members. While approximately 25% of youth were reported to have experienced each of sexual abuse, physical abuse, and domestic violence, over 60% were reported to have been victimized outside the home. In the main analyses of interest, both age and IQ were positive predictors of cognitive flexibility (such that older age and higher IQ were associated with better performance). In addition, when IQ was not included in analyses, trauma severity *positively* predicted cognitive flexibility (such that worse trauma was associated with better flexibility). Follow-up analyses revealed a similar positive relationship between non-family violence and cognitive flexibility, and also evidenced a negative relationship between PTSD symptom severity and cognitive flexibility (such that more severe PTSD symptoms were associated with worse flexibility).

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When performance on the flexible problem-solving test was examined, similar patterns were observed. Age was found to be positively related to flexible problem-solving, as expected. Family violence status was a negative predictor of flexible problem-solving, such that having experienced family violence was associated with worse performance on the test of flexible problem-solving. Similar to analyses conducted with cognitive flexibility, trauma severity *positively* predicted flexible problem-solving.

As expected, some indicators of "worse" trauma exposure (more severe PTSD symptoms, family violence exposure) were associated with worse performance on tests of cognitive flexibility or flexible problem-solving. This study is the first to demonstrate such a connection between victimization and a measure of flexible problem-solving. For youth who are already suffering the challenges of PTSD in addition to the countless immeasurable difficulties associated with violence exposure, weak flexible problem-solving threatens additional consequences for school performance, social functioning, and revictimization.

The unexpected finding that trauma severity was positively related to both cognitive flexibility and flexible problem-solving is more puzzling. One possibility is that the measurement of either cognitive flexibility or trauma exposure was flawed. However, the existence of the predicted relationships among other variables in the study, coupled with the fact that this design isolated cognitive flexibility more than past research, suggests that this is not the case. A second possible explanation is that cognitive flexibility is not a unitary construct, and that it is comprised of both adaptive flexibility and maladaptive failure to maintain set. However, principle components analysis, which should reveal such a duality, did not provide any indication that this was the case. Finally, the possibility that for *some* adolescents, *some* level of trauma exposure elicits a resilient response (i.e., encouraging them to think flexibly to avoid/escape further trauma). Such a finding could have vast implications for intervention with youth who have already experienced trauma, but additional research is essential in order to explore these relationships in greater depth.



Interested in participating in a study about the brain, attention, and memory?

All Participants will be compensated!!



We are conducting a brain imaging study (called fMRI) to see how stressful events affect attention and memory.

Contact Kristen MacKiewicz via e-mail @ [cubrainstudy@gmail.com](mailto:cubrainstudy@gmail.com) or phone (303) 735-5421

Female participants aged 12-30 wanted for a study examining brain activity while you pay attention to pictures and words. We are looking for female participants who either have or have not experienced very stressful events in childhood, such as child abuse. The study will take place on the Fitzsimmons campus of the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center in Aurora. The study involves up to 2 sessions (2.5 hours each). Individuals will be paid for their participation. Principal Investigator: Marie Banich, Ph.D., Protocol No. 04-0809

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To learn more about ongoing research studies, including one with colleagues at CU-Boulder, please visit our website: <http://mysite.du.edu/~adeprinc/study.html>

# Family Health Study

For Latina or Hispanic mothers  
with at least one child between  
the ages of 8-12.

We are studying how stress affects Latino families.

The study lasts 2 hours.

You will receive \$20 cash for your participation.

Call (303) 871-7407  
for more information.



*Study conducted in the DU Psychology Department under the direction of Anne P. DePrince, Ph.D. This study was approved by the University of Denver Internal Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects on March 8, 2010.*

# Estudio de la Salud de la Familia

Para las madres latinas o hispanas que tienen por lo menos un hijo/a entre las edades de 8 a 12 años.

Estamos investigando el impacto del estrés en las familias latinas o hispanas.

El estudio dura 2 horas.

Usted recibirá \$20 por su participación.

Llame al (303) 871-7407 para mas información.



*El estudio esta conducido por la Universidad de Denver y dirigido por la Dra. Anne P. DePrince, Ph.D. Este investigación fue aprobado por la Universidad de Denver Internal Review Board para la Protección de los Sujetos Humanos en 8 de Marzo 2010.*