



Pergamon

Child Abuse & Neglect 28 (2004) 461–474

Child Abuse  
& Neglect

## Relationship between child abuse history, trauma, and dissociation in Russian college students

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Received 18 March 2002; received in revised form 20 October 2003; accepted 13 November 2003

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### Abstract

**Objective:** The research was conducted to determine the relationship between violent trauma, child abuse history, and dissociative symptoms in a Russian population.

**Method:** Three hundred and one undergraduate students from Moscow State Linguistics University participated in the study and completed the Dissociation Continuum Scale, the Violence History Questionnaire, the Traumatic Events Survey (TES), and a demographic measure.

**Results:** Scores on dissociation and its subfactors were significantly higher in the Russian sample compared to the normative US group. The best predictors for dissociation were experiencing a violent trauma, child abuse history, and/or the experience of a fearful event. Those participants with a prior child abuse history were more symptomatic after adult trauma than those with no such history.

**Conclusions:** The relationship between trauma/abuse and dissociation is unlikely to be a result of suggestion by therapists or media exposure, since the correlation appears in a Russian population who are relatively unexposed to these suggestive sources. The validity, reliability, and structure of the dissociation measure were relatively similar in American and Russian samples.

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*Keywords:* Child abuse; Trauma; Dissociation; Russia; Cross-cultural

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### Introduction

In the last decade, the sophistication and complexity of the research on the concept of dissociation has increased dramatically. Marmar and colleagues (Marmar, Weiss, Metzler, & Delucchi, 1996; Marmar et al.,

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1994) have investigated the concept of peritraumatic dissociation (dissociative experiences *during* the trauma), Perry, Pollard, Blakley, Baker, and Vigilante (1995) have explored the biological underpinnings of various dissociative experiences, and Ogawa, Sroufe, Weinfield, Carlson, and Egeland (1997) have published detailed longitudinal analyses of the development of such symptoms. Critics generally focus on the fuzzy definition of the concept, and more recently, on the possibility of the role of suggestion in creating the perception of a dissociation-trauma link (*cf* Merckelbach & Muris, 2001).

Although the evidence for the importance of child abuse in the etiology of dissociative symptoms still appears strong (Briere & Runtz, 1988; Ferguson & Dacey, 1997; Friedrich, Jaworski, Huxsahl, & Bengtson, 1997; Mulder, Beautrais, Joyce, & Fergusson, 1998; Spiegel & Cardena, 1991), other possible traumatic and nontraumatic routes for symptom development have been proposed. Several recent authors have concentrated on the relationship of dissociation and attachment (Alexander & Alexander, 1996; Coe, Dalenberg, Aransky, & Reto, 1995) and the role of dysfunctional mother-child interactions in the causation of dissociative symptoms even in the absence of specific physical or sexual abuse (Liotti, 1992; Schore, 2001). Others have noted the role of neglect (Brunner, Parzer, Schuld, & Resch, 2000), lack of parental support (Irwin, 1996), or general maternal dysfunction (Draijer & Langeland, 1999) in the prediction of dissociative psychopathology. Steven Lynn and his colleagues (Lynn & Rhue, 1988; Rauschenberger & Lynn, 1995; Rhue & Lynn, 1987) have studied neglect, physical abuse, and fantasy training as precursors to development of fantasy-prone personality, individuals who display many of the paradigmatic dissociative behaviors and thought patterns. It appears plausible that dissociative behaviors are multidetermined, although the debate continues as to the degree to which they are culturally shaped.

#### *The study of dissociation-trauma links in non-Western cultures*

The addition of a greater number of non-English speaking/non-European samples to the dissociation literature (here, a Russian sample) has numerous advantages in adding to knowledge of dissociation and its relationship to trauma and child abuse. Most centrally, the Russian literature on child abuse is very sparse. Many professionals in the field are struggling to describe abuse in Russian, since Russian language does not have a vocabulary equivalent to the English word “abuse.” Some professionals resort to using the English version of the word and simply spell out “а́бью́з.” Further, the Russian sample is unlikely to have been exposed to a great deal of literature on child abuse (officially nonexistent in the former Soviet Union); similarly, extensive exposure to the concepts of dissociation or traumatic amnesia is unlikely. Therefore, the likelihood of dissociation-trauma or dissociation-child abuse links that are attributable to media exposure or therapeutic suggestion in such a sample is quite small. The absence of such a link, or a weaker dissociation-trauma link, thus would be supportive of the suggestion hypothesis, while results similar to American samples would support other mechanisms. Russian samples are likely to show high prevalence for trauma and loss, given recent Russian history of economic and social upheaval.

The study of dissociation and trauma within differing cultures also adds to our ability to evaluate various possible mechanisms for traumatic symptoms. A growing consensus suggests a strong biological component to traumatic reactions (*cf* Glaser, 2000; Perry et al., 1995), including dissociation (Joseph, 1999; Kunzendorf, Hulihan, Simpson, Pritykina, & Williams, 1997–1998; Perry et al., 1995). Biological mechanisms would be supported by similar relationships among symptoms and proposed causes across cultures, similar prevalence rates of symptoms (controlling for those causes), and similar factor structures within instruments alleged to measure these symptom clusters.

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