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Autobiographical memory and trauma in adolescents[☆]

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Abstract

Several clinicians who work with traumatized children have noted that these children exhibit a poor autobiographical memory. The present study was a first attempt to subject this clinical impression to formal testing. Memory for autobiographical facts (i.e., semantic autobiographical memory) was assessed in 10 adolescents with an alleged history of trauma and 17 adolescents without such a background. Results suggest that traumatized adolescents, indeed, have more difficulty with semantic personal memory than non-traumatized adolescents. Implications of the present findings for future research on trauma and autobiographical memory in children and adolescents are discussed. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Trauma; Autobiographical memory; Adolescents

1. Introduction

Clinicians treating abused children have frequently noted that these children tend to have difficulty with generating autobiographical memories. This difficulty would not pertain to traumatic memories per se, but rather to autobiographical memory in general (e.g., Courtois, 1988; Sgroi, 1989). That is, traumatized children would exhibit

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memory gaps “for months or years, not just for infancy and early childhood (which is normal) but for primary school ages and older” (Sgroi, 1989, p. 112). Whether this clinical impression is correct is not clear, because empirical studies that directly address this issue are lacking (Lindsay & Read, 1994). There is, of course, an extensive body of literature concerned with the development of autobiographical memory in “normal” children (e.g., Harley & Reese, 1999; Howe & Courage, 1997; Nelson, 1993). Additionally, several studies have examined the way in which children recollect traumatic incidents (e.g., Eth & Pynoos, 1994; Terr et al., 1996). However, to the authors’ knowledge, autobiographical memory deficits of traumatized children have not been systematically studied.

A recent study by Melchert and Parker (1997) provides little support for the idea that traumatic childhood events are related to a poor memory for childhood. In that study, 429 adults were asked if they had ever been exposed to abusive experiences during their childhood. In addition, participants were questioned about the quality of their childhood memories. The researchers failed to find a relationship between a history of alleged trauma and vague childhood memories. However, the Melchert and Parker (1997) study is far from convincing for two reasons. First, this study asked *adults* (age range 18–54 yr) about their earliest childhood memories. Second, participants gave a global and subjective (“meta-memory”) opinion about the quality of their childhood memories.

Meanwhile, there are some studies that are consistent with the clinical impression of poor autobiographical memory in abused children. For example, autobiographical memory has been examined in adults with combat-related (McNally, Lasko, Macklin & Pitman, 1995) and rape- and incest-related (Parks & Balon, 1995) posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The results of these studies indicate that a history of trauma is associated with what is termed “overgeneral” autobiographical memory (see Williams, 1996, for an overview). That is, traumatized individuals asked to retrieve memories of specific events tend to report inappropriately general memories. As to the mechanisms that underlie overgeneral memory, two explanations have been put forward. The first one is mainly based on the pioneering work of Williams and colleagues and assumes that traumatic experiences might foster a particular cognitive style (Williams, 1992; Williams & Broadbent, 1986). Individuals with that style would habitually focus on the affective features of events and therefore, would tend to encode events in rather global terms. In Williams (1992) words: “of all the multiple levels at which an episode can be encoded, the levels that carry most affect are the more general, because they evaluate behaviors according to longer term criteria” (p. 470). A second explanation emphasizes the intrusive thoughts of traumatized individuals (e.g., Kuyken & Brewin, 1994; McNally, English & Lipke, 1993). By this view, intrusive memories would consume cognitive resources and this would interfere with the retrieval of specific autobiographical memories. This hypothesis is supported by the experiment of McNally and colleagues who found that Vietnam combat veterans with PTSD had more difficulty retrieving specific autobiographical memories after exposure to a combat videotape (McNally, Litz, Prassas, Shin & Weathers, 1994). Note that both interpretations of overgeneralized autobiographical memory are not mutually exclusive.

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