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Behaviour Research and Therapy 42 (2004) 1–12

**BEHAVIOUR
RESEARCH AND
THERAPY**

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A comparison of flashbacks and ordinary autobiographical memories of trauma: content and language

Steph J. Hellawell ^{a,*}, Chris R. Brewin ^b

^a Royal Holloway, University of London, UK

^b University College, London, UK

Received 12 November 2002; received in revised form 11 March 2003; accepted 12 March 2003

Abstract

We investigated hypotheses derived from the dual representation theory of posttraumatic stress disorder, which proposes that flashbacks and ordinary memories of trauma are supported by different types of representation. Sixty-two participants meeting diagnostic criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder completed a detailed written trauma narrative, and afterwards identified those sections in the narrative that had been written in flashback and ordinary memory periods. As predicted, flashback periods were characterised by greater use of detail, particularly perceptual detail, by more mentions of death, more use of the present tense, and more mention of fear, helplessness, and horror. In contrast, ordinary memory sections were characterised by more mention of secondary emotions such as guilt and anger.

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Keywords: Memory; PTSD; Trauma; Flashback; Narrative

1. Introduction

The intense revisualizations of the traumatic scene (commonly known as “flashbacks”) reported by patients with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) have been conceptualized both as a distinct form of memory (e.g., Brewin, 2001; Brewin, Dalgleish, & Joseph, 1996) and as a more fragmented and disorganized form of ordinary autobiographical memory (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2001; Foa & Riggs, 1993). Previously (Hellawell & Brewin, 2002) we presented evidence that parts of a trauma narrative labeled by PTSD patients as corresponding to periods of flashback

* Corresponding author. Cumbria Villa, Barnet, Enfield and Haringay Trust, Chase Farm Hospital Site, The Ridgeway, Enfield EN2 8JL, UK. Tel.: +44-20-7629-5927; fax: +44-20-7916-1989.

E-mail address: stephellawell@mac.com (S.J. Hellawell).

differed systematically from the rest of the narrative in several ways. Periods labeled as flashback memory were associated with selectively impaired performance on a visuospatial task and with observer ratings of increased autonomic and motor behaviour. In this article we test the hypothesis that periods of flashback will also differ from periods of ordinary memory in specific aspects of content and grammatical form.

Researchers who study psychological disorders have proposed that traumatic situations produce particularly durable memories, but to date only a small amount of research has investigated the characteristics of memories for personally experienced traumatic events. [Van der Kolk and Fisler \(1995\)](#) had PTSD patients describe their memories for the traumatic event versus another intense but nontraumatic event. The two types of memory were reported to differ markedly, with traumatic events initially being recalled in the form of powerful and fragmentary somatosensory experiences (flashbacks), with a narrative account only developing after a period of time. Nontraumatic events were invariably recalled in narrative form and no flashbacks were described. [Reynolds and Brewin \(1998\)](#) asked matched groups of patients with PTSD and depression and nonpsychiatric controls to describe their most prominent intrusive cognitions about a significant life event or trauma. These cognitions were frequently flashbacks in the PTSD group, but flashbacks were rare among depressed patients and absent among the controls. In contrast, [Tromp, Koss, Figueredo and Tharan \(1995\)](#) conducted a postal survey of women employees and compared their descriptions of rape versus other unpleasant events. Contrary to prediction, rape memories were less clear and vivid, contained a less meaningful order, were less well-remembered, and were less thought and talked about.

These conflicting results can be accommodated if it is assumed that high levels of emotion promote the laying down of an alternative and more durable form of trauma memory, which coexists with an ordinary autobiographical memory for the event. The reported characteristics of trauma memories would then depend on which specific memory type was accessed by the demands of the task. This multi-level approach to memory has been repeatedly put forward by trauma theorists (e.g., [Janet, 1904](#); [van der Kolk & van der Hart, 1991](#)), and is similar in essence to more general models of memory such as [Johnson and Multhaup's \(1992\)](#) multiple-entry modular memory system.

According to a recent version of these multi-level memory theories, the dual representation theory of PTSD (DRT: [Brewin, 2001](#); [Brewin, 2003](#); [Brewin, Dalgleish & Joseph, 1996](#)), memories of a personally experienced traumatic event can be of two distinct types, stored in different representational formats. One type of format (“verbally accessible memory”) supports ordinary autobiographical memories that can be retrieved either automatically or using strategic processes. Ordinary autobiographical memories can be edited and interact with the rest of the autobiographical knowledge base, so that the trauma is represented within a complete personal context comprising past, present, and future. The second type of format (“situationally accessible memory”) supports the specific trauma-related dreams and ‘flashbacks’ that are a particularly notable feature of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Flashbacks can only be retrieved automatically, not strategically, and do not interact with the rest of the autobiographical memory system. They typically involve the intense and sometimes fragmentary reliving of the traumatic event although, less commonly, additional elements may be included in the memories ([Brewin, 2003](#); [Merckelbach, Muris, Horselenberg, & Rassin, 1998](#)). By deliberately attending to the content of flashbacks they can be described in words and integrated with the verbally accessible memory system. Consistent

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