

Welcome to the TSS Lab

Fall 2003
Volume I

Dear Colleague,

Thank you for your interest in and support of the Traumatic Stress Studies (TSS) Lab at the University of Denver.

We are thrilled to introduce some of our current research projects to you. In the following pages, you will read about new data as well as ongoing research projects from our lab. We look forward to sending you updates periodically to let you know about new projects and research findings.

As you will read, our research focuses on the relationship between trauma, emotion, cognitive processes, and posttraumatic distress. Because we believe that the study of trauma requires examination of multiple influences (e.g., developmental processes, cultural factors, individual differences, biology and the environment), our research draws on multiple methodologies (e.g., laboratory cognitive tasks, clinical interviews, survey methodology, physiological methods), as well as theories from diverse psychological perspectives.

We believe that research is the most powerful and exciting when it is shared. Our goal is to build community partnerships with other agencies and researchers to support the important work that each of us brings to addressing trauma and violence.

On behalf of the TSS Lab, we look forward to finding ways to work with you. And we thank you for all of the work you do on behalf of victims and survivors of traumatic events.

Best regards,

Anne P. DePrince, Ph.D.
Director

MEET THE TSS LAB

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Check us out on the web at
www.du.edu/~adeprinc/lab.html

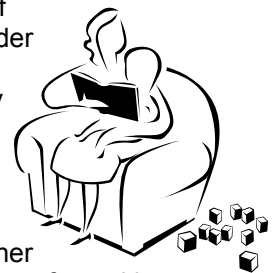
Questions?

We look forward to hearing your comments, questions, & research needs. Phone: 303-871-7407

EXPOSURE TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Most of the information currently available to domestic violence shelters, clinicians, and other advocates working with child witnesses of domestic violence concerns the emotional well-being of these children, with little focus on cognitive skills. From clinical experience, we know that children exposed to domestic violence often have academic difficulties. In the TSS lab, we are very interested in understanding the impact that exposure to domestic violence has on children's academic achievement.

We are currently conducting a study in which we examine how symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) relate to problems with attention and memory (two of the basic skills needed for academic success). We are also looking at the conditions under which PTSD and other trauma-related difficulties interfere with learning. Our goal is to help identify the type of school environment that will best support learning for children exposed to domestic violence.



Now Welcoming Participants!

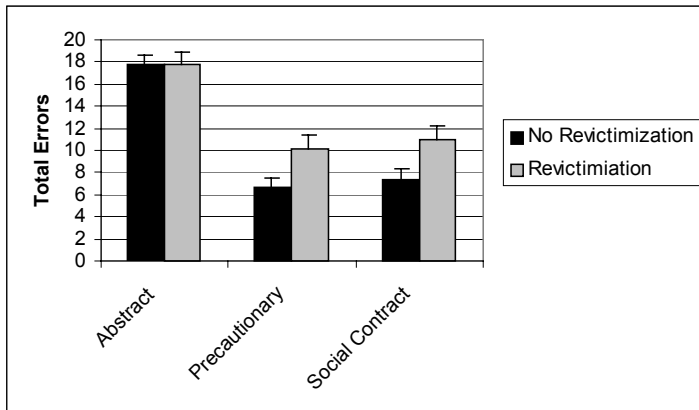
Study: Kiddie CAT (cognition after trauma).
Who: Mothers and children (7-11 yrs.) who *have and have not* experienced domestic violence.
What: 2 sessions at the University of Denver. Participants are compensated \$25/session.
For more information: 303-871-7407

New Data!

REVICITIMIZATION RISK

Childhood maltreatment predicts not only mental and physical health consequences, but also places the individual at risk for future victimization. While we know several broad factors are associated with revictimization risk (e.g., dissociation, substance abuse, low self-esteem), we have lacked models to examine specific alterations in processing of social and emotional information that may place individuals at risk of revictimization. We have undertaken a series of studies to examine the contributions of alterations in cognitive and emotion processing that predict revictimization risk.

As part of our ongoing research on revictimization, we tested whether individuals with self-reported histories of revictimization performed differently than a non-revictimized group when they were asked to detect “cheaters” in social relationship and safety rules. Indeed, when rules involved social relationships or safety information, the revictimized group made more errors than the non-revictimized group. The groups did not differ on errors made in abstract rules (that did not have social or safety information). This pattern suggests that the revictimized group did not have difficulty with conditional reasoning generally, but with reasoning about social and safety information.



DePrince, A.P. (under review). Social cognition and revictimization risk..

Ongoing Research: Revictimization Risk Studies
Who: Mothers and their 7-11 year old children who have been exposed to domestic violence, young adults aged 18-25..
What: 1-2 sessions at the University of Denver. Participants are compensated for their time.

ATTENTION & MEMORY STUDIES

We use methods from cognitive psychology to examine how trauma-related information is processed and remembered. We have found that

how dissociative an individual is, as well as the attentional demands of a task (whether someone is asked to focus or divide their attention), play a role in how trauma-related information is processed. We find that high dissociators (compared to low dissociators) are able to recall **less** trauma-related information when they are allowed to divide their attention compared to when they must focus their attention. We are interested in whether a divided attention context might help children and adults keep threatening information from awareness. We are excited about implications this research may have for academic settings in which maltreated children may try to divide their attention to keep “bad” thoughts out of awareness.

Ongoing Research: Attention and Memory Studies
Who: Children, adolescents and adults.
What: 1-2 sessions at the University of Denver. Participants are compensated for their time.

TRAUMA AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Children’s repeated exposure to abuse and violence can have an impact on their developing social relationships. Several studies have linked childhood abuse histories with problems in peer relationships. We are exploring whether traumatized children are at risk for misinterpreting the actions and intentions of others, which in turn may influence their peer relationships. We are beginning a project to examine how children with a range of trauma histories view the intentions of others. We are interested in whether some children show a tendency to over-attribute either positive or negative intentions to others in social situations. Such tendencies may create problems in social relationships for some children.

Ongoing Research: Theory of Mind Studies
Who: Children ages 3-11.
What: 1-2 sessions at the University of Denver. Participants are compensated for their time.

The ability to correctly read the non-verbal signals of others is also critical to healthy interpersonal relationships. For example, when talking you might observe interest, excitement, contentment, even anxiety on the face of the person listening. Being able to correctly recognize those emotions allows you to respond appropriately, which in turn helps you nurture that relationship. Individuals who consistently misjudge emotions in others are at higher risk for peer difficulties. Unfortunately, research has suggested that children from violent environments may have a bias towards recognizing



anger in others and difficulty recognizing sorrow. We are interested in studying the recognition of emotions in children who are in violent environments and in adults who have childhood trauma histories. Better understanding of when, how and why these misjudgments occur will provide important information for intervention.

Ongoing Research: Processing Emotions Studies
Who: Children, adolescents and adults.
What: 1-2 sessions at the University of Denver. Participants are compensated for their time.

DEVELOPMENT OF DISSOCIATION

As infants, we spend most of our time eating, sleeping, or crying in response to discomfort. We move dramatically from one state (sleeping) to another (crying). As we grow older, we learn to integrate and transition more smoothly from one state to another – a skill that is critical to the development of a coherent sense of self. Parents are central to learning how to bridge from one state to another. When a child is crying because of a broken toy, a parent who says “Oh, you’re crying and I see you are sad” helps the child to understand emotion (sad) in connection with behavior (crying), as well helps the child to smoothly bridge to another emotion state.



Some theorists have suggested that dissociative problems are based in early difficulty transitioning from one state to another (see Putnam, 1996). We are interested in whether children who grow up in environments where parents are not able to help them bridge emotion and behavioral states may be at higher risk for problems with dissociation. We predict that inconsistent parenting in particular may put children at a disadvantage for learning to transition between states, and therefore increases risk of dissociative problems. We are beginning a study that will examine how parenting practices, as well as parent-child emotion communication, relates to development of dissociative problems. We are also interested in how both the child and the parent’s trauma history predict dissociation in children.

Upcoming Research: Development of Dissociation
Who: Children, adolescents and adults.
What: 1-2 sessions at the University of Denver. Participants are compensated for their time.

MEDIA AND TRAUMA

Each day we are bombarded with information about murder, terrorism, war, and destruction on the news. Accompanying this information, are images

of these events displayed repeatedly. Previous research has shown that media images of violent events are related to negative outcomes, such as a delay of the grieving process. We are studying whether exposure to media photo images is related to specific attentional biases – that is, do viewers focus their attention on violent images or do they divert their attention from a violent image and instead focus on a neutral image. We are also interested in examining how a person’s trauma history relates to whether she/he attends to the violent image and for how long. We hope to gain a better understanding of the impact of media images on our attention and cognition.

Ongoing Research: Processing Media Images
Who: Young adults ages 18-25
What: 1 session at the University of Denver. Participants are compensated for their time.

In a related study, we are interested in how media coverage of victims and survivors may decrease or increase bystanders’ tendencies to blame the victim for the event. Some theoretical work suggests that bystanders tend to blame victims for their experiences, in part, to maintain positive assumptions of the world (e.g., I am safe, good things happen to good people); however, this does not explain why people tend to blame victims of some traumas (e.g., sexual assault) more than others (e.g., natural disasters). While traumas may globally challenge our basic assumptions of the world, there may be something unique about interpersonal traumas that are particularly threatening, leading people to hold more dearly to their basic assumptions of the world. In turn, people may be at increased risk of blaming the victim, thus allowing the bystander to assure him/herself that he/she would not have suffered the same fate. We are also interested in how perception of in-groups and out-groups affects responses to victims. In order to maintain psychological safety, people may tend to hold individuals they perceive as different from them (*out-group*) responsible for the traumas they have experienced. As the media often focuses on variables that are likely to heighten the salience of the in-group/out-group distinction (e.g., socioeconomic status, race, gender), we are interested in the role the media plays in shaping responses to victims.

NEW PUBLICATIONS FROM THE TSS LAB

DePrince, A.P. & Freyd, J.J. (in press). Forgetting trauma stimuli. *Psychological Science*.
DePrince, A.P. (under review). Social cognition and revictimization risk.
Rea, J. G., & Rossman, B. B. R. (in press). Children exposed to interparental violence: Does parenting

contribute to functioning over time? *Journal of Emotional Abuse*.

Rossmann, B. B. R., & Rea, J. G. (in press). The relation of parenting styles and inconsistencies to adaptive functioning for children in conflictual and violent families. *Journal of Family Violence*.



Freyd, J.J. & DePrince, A.P. (Eds.). (2001). *Trauma and Cognitive Science: A Meeting of Minds, Science, and Human Experience*. New York: Haworth Press.



THANK YOU NOTES

Thank you to Denver individuals and agencies who have made our work possible!

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- Karen Mallah, *MHCD*
- Sarah McGuire, *CRI Coordinator, Decatur Place*
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- Megan Saylor, *Vanderbilt University (TN)*
- Eileen Zurbriggen, *University of California, Santa Cruz (CA)*

If you are interested in participating in funding research through the Traumatic Stress Studies (TSS) Lab, please contact Dr. Anne P. DePrince at adeprinc@du.edu or 303-871-7407



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