

TSS GROUP NEWS



Traumatic Stress Studies Group, Department of Psychology, 2155 S. Race Street, Denver CO 80208
Web: <http://www.du.edu/~adeprinc/lab.html> Phone: 303.871.7407

The last days of summer

By Anne P. DePrince, Ph.D.

As summer winds down, we look back on some exciting accomplishments. We began an important study on revictimization (see page 4 for more information about recruiting participants) that will continue this fall. Please help us spread the word!

We also spent time analyzing and writing up study results. On page 3, you will read about recent findings from a study of revictimization. On page 4, you'll see that we presented two new studies on research ethics at a national conference.

Fall promises to keep us busy. As you'll read on page 2, we will start a new study on victim blaming. In addition, we look forward to educational events, including a Research Training Day with the Children's Advocacy Committee of the Colorado Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

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We also look forward to welcoming new students and initiating new projects with our community partners.

If you have ideas for projects or requests for training, please let us know! On behalf of the TSS Group, 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.

Anne P. DePrince, Ph.D.

Director, TSS Group
Assistant Professor, University of Denver

Electronic Resource Spotlight

By Anne P. DePrince, Ph.D.

As has become tradition in our quarterly newsletter, we are pleased to highlight new updates to the Denver Trauma Pages, <http://www.du.edu/psychology/traumapages/>, our website intended to serve as a resource for Denver-area professionals working on issues related to trauma and violence.

One of our collaborators, Dr. Eileen Zurbriggen (University of California-Santa Cruz), chaired an

important task force for the American Psychological Association on sexualized images of girls in the media. We hope that the findings of this task force, which are now available at <http://www.apa.org/pi/wpo/sexualization.html> and can be accessed through the Denver Trauma pages, will be of assistance to victim advocates and educators. Among the helpful links, this website includes media literary resources for parents and advocates seeking to empower girls (<http://www.apa.org/pi/wpo/sexualizationres.html>).

Why do we blame victims?

By Melody Combs, MA

Survivors of traumatic events can face severe physical, emotional, and other devastating consequences following the event. In addition, survivors are often blamed by others. In fact, the greater the severity of a traumatic event, the more likely survivors will be blamed (Chaikin & Darley, 1973); and women tend to be blamed more than men (Bell, Kuriloff, & Lottes, 1994).

Researchers have proposed several theories to explain why survivors are sometimes blamed for traumatic events. Just World Theory (JWT) proposes that people blame survivors in order to preserve a belief that the world is a just place in which people get what they deserve (Lerner, 1980). In other words, good things will happen to good people; and bad things will happen to bad people. According to JWT, this belief aids in survival because the individual can function in the world without the constant fear that something life-threatening could happen at any moment. While such beliefs may help bystanders, the resulting victim-blaming can be extremely detrimental to survivors who may be deprived of aid and experience increased distress due to potential blame imposed on them.

Victim blaming is all-too-common. What factors increase or decrease this tendency?

Certain factors seem to eliminate or even reverse survivor-blame attributed by bystanders. For example, bystanders who were asked to imagine themselves in a survivor's position (described by the researchers as an instruction to be sympathetic) were much less likely to derogate the survivor than bystanders who were instructed to simply watch the survivor (Aderman, Brehm, and Katz, 1974).

As an extension of this research, Melody Combs (in collaboration with Anne DePrince) will begin a study this fall to examine other factors that may decrease survivor-blame. Specifically, we will examine the effects that similar group membership have on tendencies to blame survivors of traumatic events. Social psychologists have long known that people tend to favor and give benefits to people who belong to the same groups as they do. Those groups can include gender, ethnicity, age, occupation, neighborhood of residence, and schools attended (among many others). We predict that less blame will be attributed to a survivor if the survivor is described

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TSS Group Achievements

By Anne P. DePrince

Ann Chu was awarded the National Research Service Award (NASA) from the National Institutes of Mental Health. This prestigious and highly competitive award will fund her dissertation research on revictimization and threat detection. Ann also received the Inclusive Excellence Award from the University of Denver and a Teaching Assistant Award from the Psychology Department.

Rheena Pineda received the Inclusive Excellence Award from the University of Denver.

Kristin Weinzierl received a Teaching Award from the Psychology Department at the University of Denver.

See more on these and other accomplishments at www.du.edu/~adeprinc/award.html.

Revictimization: Testing Markers of Emotional Responses

By Aimee Reichmann-Decker, Ph.D.

Of the many deleterious outcomes associated with child abuse, the increased vulnerability for future victimization is particularly insidious. Women who are sexually and/or physically abused in childhood are more likely to be revictimized as adults than their peers.

Aimee Reichmann-Decker (in collaboration with Drs. Anne DePrince and Daniel McIntosh) studied how emotional responsiveness – that is, the way one responds to emotional information – relates to revictimization risk in women. In particular, we examined whether very early markers of automatic emotion processing – that is, emotional processing that begins after just a few milliseconds of being presented with emotional stimuli – differed in women who experienced revictimization, child abuse only, or no abuse.

In order to catch this very fast emotional processing, we used psychophysiological methods. Women were asked to wear miniature sensors on their faces, designed to pick up on subtle facial muscle movements (movements not visible to the naked eye). These subtle movements are reliable indicators that the emotional response system has been activated.

With these sensors in place, we looked at a marker of early emotional processing – the *affective startle response*. The startle response is a common human response (think about your co-worker who jumps every time the front door closes) that indicates your system is getting ready to respond. If something negative or threatening appears in the immediate environment, you want your defensive system to be ready to deal with the challenge.

To evaluate whether different types of emotional information were associated with changes in women's startle responses, women heard an unexpected blast of white noise while viewing pictures of people engaged in pleasant activities

Using physiological methods to better understand revictimization.

(e.g., children playing) or dangerous/negative activities (e.g., a man attacking a woman). Past research suggests that people startle more to negative pictures and less to positive pictures.

Women who reported experiences of revictimization did *not* startle to negative images as much as women who reported childhood-only abuse or no abuse. This suggested that some of the typical, early defensive responses in the emotional system were dampened. Interestingly, women who reported childhood-only abuse (and no additional victimizations) showed increased startle to both negative and positive pictures, suggesting that their systems were prepared to react to any arousing emotional stimuli. We speculate that this increased response to any arousing stimuli may help protect women who report histories of childhood abuse from later victimizations, but this will need to be tested in future research.



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as belonging to the same group as the bystander. We hope this research will point to new ways to decrease blame placed on survivors. For example, to the extent that people are less likely to blame fellow group members for traumatic events, advocates and the media could emphasize similarities between survivors and other relevant groups. Stay tuned for our findings!

New Ethics Research

By Anne P. DePrince, Ph.D.

Anne DePrince and Ann Chu presented new data on the ethics of conducting trauma research at the American Psychological Association Annual Meeting in San Francisco this month.

We asked almost 200 children to tell us about their experiences in our research studies. We found that children exposed to interpersonal traumas (such as abuse or witnessing domestic violence) did not differ from children exposed to non-interpersonal traumas or no traumas on their perceptions of the research process. In fact, children in all three groups overwhelmingly made positive appraisals of what it was like to be in our studies, regardless of their trauma history, current level of symptoms, or cognitive functioning. This tells us that with careful training of research personnel, we can safely involve children in the research process.

We asked adults in four studies to answer detailed questions about their perceptions of the personal benefits, negative emotions, drawbacks, and overall quality of their participation in our studies. Across all 4 studies, adults rated the personal benefits of participating as much higher than any drawbacks or negative emotions. Comparing across these studies, participants made the most positive ratings of personal

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benefits when the research included interviews (rather than just questionnaires). We believe that interviews provide participants an opportunity to voice oppressive experiences that can otherwise be treated as taboo in our society. By giving voice to their experiences and the context of their lives in interviews, participants seemed to find greater personal meaning.

We will continue to collect data on participants' perceptions of our studies; and will use these findings to continue to develop research procedures that best support participants.

Links to the PowerPoint slides from these talks are available on the Denver Trauma Pages at www.du.edu/psychology/traumapages/outcomes.html.

Recruiting Participants!

We are inviting **women (ages 18-40)** who have experienced either **childhood abuse or a recent crime** to participate in a study examining risk and protective factors for revictimization. Participants will be invited to the University of Denver for two 2-hour sessions; and a third session in 4 months. Women will be asked to answer questions as well as complete several tasks (e.g., attention and memory games). Participants receive \$25, \$35, and \$20 for the 3 testing sessions. Free parking is available. Our offices are accessible by bus and lightrail.

For more information, please contact Ann Chu (Project Coordinator) at 303.871.7407 or achu@du.edu.