



Dissociation and Cognitive Distortion: Functional and Effective Similarities

Cristen L. McLean, BA, Bridget Klest, MA, Jennifer J. Freyd, PhD

University of Oregon



UNIVERSITY
OF OREGON

Dynamics Lab
<http://dynamic.uoregon.edu/>

ABSTRACT

In the wake of traumatic events, people must find ways to cope with the distress they experience. Different types of traumas produce different types of distress (e.g., disruption of attachment relationships vs. fear of death), and thus different coping mechanisms may be appropriate in each situation. Two common coping strategies are dissociation and cognitive distortions. This study examines relationships between dissociation, cognitive distortions, and characteristics of traumatic events experienced by participants, such as age at the time of trauma and whether the trauma was perpetrated by a someone close to the victim. Survey data from 295 participants indicated that dissociation was a common reaction to trauma for all types of events at all ages. Inconsistent with previous findings, dissociation was more common among those experiencing low betrayal traumas and trauma at older ages, suggesting that this sample may not be a representative sample. However, cognitive distortions were not so common among people who experienced trauma before age 6, and were more common among people experiencing non-interpersonal traumas and traumas low in betrayal than among people experiencing traumas perpetrated by people close to them. Future studies should attempt to replicate these findings with more representative samples. Implications for research and treatment are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Dissociation and cognitive distortions are two psychological defenses which have been associated with response to traumatic events. There are several situations in which altering perception of experiential information such that it is either not fully integrated, as occurs in dissociation, or cognitively distorted could function as an adaptive response to trauma.

For example, when the perpetrator of a trauma also provides for the victim's emotional or tangible needs there is motivation to maintain the relationship. Doing so would necessitate the use of psychological defenses or coping strategies, to cope with ongoing trauma.

Similarly, schema maintenance might be an important motivation for utilization of each of these psychological defenses. Dissociation, according to Peyton (1998), works to maintain the person's existing schemas by preventing the assimilation of experiential information that might lead to their modification. Likewise, according to Beck & Weishaar (1989) and Smucker & Dancu (1999), a person is more vulnerable to using cognitive distortions if his or her cognitive schemas are rigid and inflexible.

Accordingly both dissociation and cognitive distortions can function as useful mechanisms to reduce the impact of a trauma through either maintaining necessary relationships or maintaining foundational schemas.

Past research has not attended to ways in which dissociation and cognitive distortions might function similarly or differently. The current study examines relationships between dissociation, cognitive distortions, and characteristics of traumatic events experienced by participants, such as age at the time of trauma and whether the trauma was perpetrated by a someone close to the victim.

METHODS

Participants

- 295 undergraduates at the University of Oregon
- 70% female; Mean age = 19 years; 96% heterosexual
- 82% White, 7% Asian, 3.5% Hispanic, 7.5% other/decline to respond

Measures

- Dissociative Experiences Scale (DES) 28-item measure, possible range 0-100, higher scores indicate more dissociative experiences
- Dysfunctional Attitudes Scale (DAS) 40-item measure, possible range 40-280, higher scores indicate more cognitive distortions
- Brief Betrayal Trauma Survey (BBTS) 14-items, each assessed for 3 age categories, scores indicate number of types of events experienced

Method

- Participants completed surveys anonymously in an on-line research study administration program

RESULTS

Dissociation and cognitive distortions were significantly positively correlated, ($r = .29, p < .01$). Trauma and dissociation were significantly correlated across types of trauma and across ages at time of trauma. Trauma and cognitive distortions were correlated for both types of trauma at all ages except 0-6 years old (see Table 1).

A series of t-test indicated that people who had experienced at least one high betrayal trauma were significantly more dissociative than people who had not, but that these groups did not differ in number of cognitive distortions. People who had experienced at least one low-betrayal trauma had significantly higher scores on both dissociation and cognitive distortions than people who had not (see Table 2)

Table 1. Correlations Between Trauma and Dissociation and Cognitive Distortions

		DES	DAS
High Betrayal Trauma	Age 0-6	.145*	.067
	Age 6-11	.211**	.153**
	Age 12+	.267**	.186**
Low Betrayal Trauma	Age 0-6	.248**	.105
	Age 6-11	.300**	.127*
	Age 12+	.361**	.124*

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 2. Trauma, Dissociation, and Cognitive Distortions t-tests

Independent Samples	Dependent variable	Mean Difference	Standard Error	t
High Betrayal Trauma Experienced at least once – not experienced	DES	4.64	1.50	3.10**
	DAS	2.19	3.11	0.71
Low Betrayal Trauma Experienced at least once – not experienced	DES	6.73	1.39	4.85**
	DAS	5.98	2.94	2.04*

For all analyses df = 293

** t-test is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* t-test is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

DISCUSSION

Results of this study suggest that both dissociation and cognitive distortions are more likely to occur among people who have experienced trauma than people who have not.

Inconsistent with previous research, dissociation was less strongly associated with traumas high in betrayal and traumas occurring at young ages than with low-betrayal traumas and those at older ages. Thus results of this study should be interpreted with caution, as this sample may not be a representative sample.

However, it appears that trauma before the age of 6 is less likely to result in cognitive distortions than in dissociation. This makes sense given the limits of cognitive development at that age.

Data from this study have implications for the utility of cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) as a treatment for people who have experienced trauma, in particular early childhood trauma. Although CBT techniques are among the most highly recommended for treating trauma responses (Smucker & Dancu, 1999), at present there is scant research on how dissociation impacts the efficacy of CBT.

In this study, betrayal trauma, particularly that experienced before age 6, did not indicate the presence of more cognitive distortions than were present among people who did not report a history of trauma. This indicates that targeting cognitive distortions may be less appropriate for some people who report trauma histories than others.

Future research should further examine the relationships between dissociation and cognitive distortions among trauma survivors, to determine whether these results hold with more representative samples, and examine how these two coping strategies are impacted by therapeutic interventions.

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Please address correspondence to: Bridget Klest, MA, 1227 University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403 bklest@uoregon.edu .

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