

Characteristics of Memory for Autobiographical and Episodic Events in Women With Dissociative Identity Disorder

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Introduction

In dissociative identity disorder (DID) two or more distinct identities recurrently take control of behavior and there is an inability to recall important personal information. This study takes a broad view of memory, using several types of tests, including emotionally salient stimuli, and striving for ecological validity.

Hypotheses: DID participants may show slower reaction time (RT) in accessing autobiographical memory, and/or different quality of memories; DID participants will show better memory for neutral and happy stories than for fear story.

Method

Participants

11 women diagnosed with DID, from Boston and OR/WA. Education ranged from high school diploma/GED to completed graduate school. Medium sample size for this field. 13 female college participants, no dissociative disorders.

Materials

- 3 stories about event from narrator's childhood: neutral, fear, happy
- Individual Difference Measures:
Dissociative Experiences Scale (DES; Bernstein & Putnam, 1986): 28 items
Brief Betrayal Trauma Survey (BBTS; Goldberg & Freyd, 2006): 12 items assessing non-interpersonal, sexual trauma, physical and emotional abuse, and witnessing violence
Memory Characteristics Questionnaire (MCQ): assesses phenomenological qualities of specific autobiographical memory (modified from Johnson, Foley, Suengas, & Raye, 1988)

Procedure

- Verbally produce autobiographical memories in response to cue words; fill out MCQ about characteristics of chosen memories
- Listen to 3 stories (neutral, fear, happy); free recall summaries and multiple choice questions about story details

Mean Scores (and SDs) on Individual Difference Measures

	DID Group	Student Group
Age in years	35.35 (12.57) range 23 – 62	23.07 (6.42) range 18 – 37
DES score	56.16 (21.88)	9.01 (10.13)
Betrayal trauma before age 18	13.00 (3.37)	1.08 (1.61)

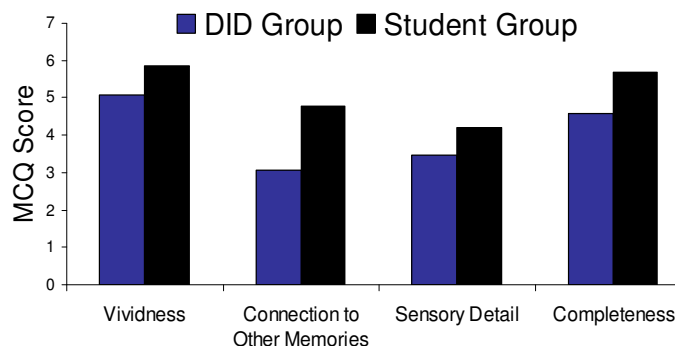
Results:

Autobiographical Memory

Reaction Time: DID group faster to verbally produce memories in response to cue words, $F(1, 16) = 2.62, p = .125, d = 1.00$. Within the DID group, time to produce memories correlated highly with amount of high-betrayal trauma in childhood: $r = .93, p = .07$.

Memory Quality: On MCQ, DID group had lower overall scores than student group, indicating worse memory, less vividness, and less connection to related memories, $F(1, 22) = 7.62, p < .02, d = -.98$.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MEMORY: Quality



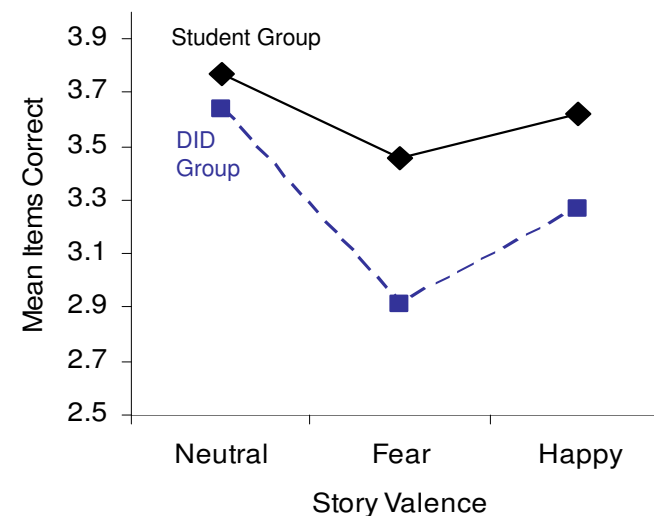
Results: Story Memory

Free Recall Summaries: DID participants were almost equal to students, $F(1, 22) = .16, p > .10, d = -.15$. Neither group showed differences among stories in summary recall.
Detailed multiple choice items: Students showed no statistical difference across stories. Although scores for the neutral and fear stories were not statistically different from each other in the DID group [$t(10) = 1.268, p = .233$], there was a larger difference between these two points than between any other points, with a medium effect size, $d = .56$.

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STORY MEMORY: Multiple Choice Items



Discussion

The DID participants, though older than the students, were faster to produce autobiographical memories than were students, which did not support the hypothesis of a DID deficit. The finding did not replicate an earlier case study (Schacter, et al., 1989). The DID participants had worse autobiographical memory scores than did students, which supported the hypothesis of differences in memory quality.

Both groups were approximately equal at recalling the gist of stories, but DID participants had trouble with detailed questions, especially regarding the fearful story. This finding mildly supported the hypothesis about the interaction of fear with memory in DID.

Overall, this study supports the idea that memory functioning in DID is complex, and provides further evidence for a distinct dissociative style of information processing.

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