



Given Up by Parents for Survival: Separation Narratives by Formerly Persecuted Elderly Belgian Jews[☆]



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Theories of psychological trauma have suggested that trauma narratives are fragmented, lack emotion and cognitive terms (narrative evaluation), and show linguistic indicators of reliving (narrative immersion). We tested the relation between narrative evaluation and immersion on the one hand with PTSD symptoms (Impact of Event Scale – Revised) and remembered dangerous/frightening qualities of the experience on the other hand. A sample of 26 elderly Belgian Jews narrated their lives. As children they had been separated from their families to be hidden and saved from Nazi persecution. We analyzed sections of their narratives regarding separation from parents. PTSD symptoms correlated only with a lack of positive evaluations, and narrative immersion correlated with the scariness/dangerousness of the original events. We suggest that the emotional quality of memories is sufficient to predict narrative qualities that signal reliving, but that the lack of positive emotions is specific to the presence of PTSD symptoms.

General Audience Summary

Suffering from memories of traumatic life experiences influences how these memories are narrated. Which, however, are the typical narrative signs of trauma? This study sets out to answer this question on the basis of the life narratives of elderly Belgian Jews who as children had been separated from their parents and hidden to save them from being murdered by Nazi Germany. Because children rely on parents for their safety, we chose sections of life narratives dealing with the separation from parents. We found that a lack of positive emotions was related to symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, whereas narrative signs of reliving the traumatic past were related to the intensity of remembered threat. These findings demonstrate the importance of speaking about traumatic experiences with others to integrate and re-evaluate them.

Keywords: PTSD, Narrative, Immersion, Autobiographical memory, Holocaust

Authors Note

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Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is defined by four sets of symptoms: two directly related to an extremely threatening event, namely intrusive re-experiencing and avoidance of situations that might remind of the traumatic experience, and two more general ones, psychic numbing and increased arousal. The same extremely threatening event may turn out to be traumatic for some individuals, creating a “wound” leading to psychological symptoms, but not for others. Consequences may be more severe and generalized if the traumatic experience was experienced repeatedly and embedded in a temporally extended situation such as living in a relationship with a violent husband (Herman, 1992) or being held in a death camp (Krystal, 1968). Even after many decades, Holocaust survivors still display a high level of symptoms of PTSD (Barel, Van IJzendoorn, Sagi-Schwartz, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2010).

Core symptoms of PTSD thus concern both the intrusion and the avoidance of memories of traumatic events. Some theories describe the event as being too overwhelming to be assimilated psychologically. In terms of memory processes, this suggests that traumatic experiences are not encoded well which in turn produces difficulties in intentional and complete remembering (e.g., Brewin, 2001). Other theories locate the difficulty not in the initial processing of the experience, but in the process of remembering (Rubin, Berntsen, & Bohni, 2008), including retrieving and narrating the memory. Here we focus on difficulties in narrating traumatic events.

Three major difficulties have been suggested. First, a difficulty in telling an integrated story (van der Kolk & Fisler, 1995) or in integrating the event into the life story (Janet, 1919), leads to fragmented trauma narratives or disintegrated life stories, and facilitates intrusive reliving. A second suggestion expects a reduced use of explicit *evaluations* (Labov & Waletzky, 1967), which reflect the subjective processing of events. They comprise *global evaluations* (e.g., “that was really awful”) and the use of *mental state language* concerning perception, cognition, volition, and emotions. A reduced use of evaluations might reflect psychic numbing. A third suggestion expects trauma narratives to reflect the loss of distance experienced in reliving the traumatic experience. Laub and Auerhahn (1993) contrasted such *overpowering narratives* to *witnessed narratives*, which include not only the past protagonist’s perceptions, but also the present narrator’s and others’ cognitions about the past experience and its meaning. Such an immersion in the past experience also takes place when the event is actually narrated step by step, which produces rather lengthy narratives. Finally narrative immersion is displayed in a dramatic narrative style (Chafe, 1994), which includes such stylistic elements as use of the present tense for past events (historical present), of direct speech, and the shifting of the reference of deictic temporal and spatial expressions from the *here* and *now* of the narrator to the *there* and *then* of the protagonist, for example by using “now” or “here on my side” to speak about the past and the protagonist’s position.

Many, mostly small, studies have provided little evidence for fragmentation, mixed evidence for a lack of emotional and cognitive evaluation, and some evidence for narrative immersion (cf. Crespo & Fernández-Lansac, 2015; O’Kearney & Perrott, 2006; Römis, Leban, Habermas, & Döll-Hentschker, 2014). The

most recent research offers no support for fragmentation (Rubin et al., 2016), but clear (Jaeger, Lindblom, Parker-Guilbert, & Zoellner, 2014) and mixed support for reduced emotional and cognitive evaluation (D’Andrea, Chiu, Casas, & Deldin, 2012; Filkuková, Jensen, Hafstad, Minde, & Dyb, 2016), as well as support for immersion manifest in increased length (Fernández-Lansac & Crespo, 2015) and in a focus on the self (D’Andrea et al., 2012; Jaeger et al., 2014). One study showed opposite effects for evaluation and fragmentation in traumatic birth narratives (Ayers, Radoš, & Balouch, 2015). Because of the lack of evidence for fragmentation, this present study focuses on evaluation and immersion.

We test the hypotheses of a diminished narrative evaluation and increased narrative immersion in trauma narratives by analyzing sections of extensive life narratives of elderly Belgian Jews who were given up by their parents for survival during the German occupation of Belgium (1942–1945). This is a very special historical group of individuals who underwent the potentially very traumatic experience of separation from their parents in childhood and who lived for years hidden with false identity and under the threat of being killed at any moment (cf. Vromen, 2016). In the narratives, the most frequently mentioned event from the extensive and complex threatening childhood experiences, and the most relevant one for children who depend on parents for safety, was separation from the parents. We chose the narrative sections that deal with the individuals’ separation from their biological parents and siblings, as well as with the separation from their foster parents after the liberation of Belgium, which took place to reunite them with a surviving parent, or to be placed with a family member or in a Jewish orphanage (Fohn & Heenen-Wolff, 2011; Keilson & Sarphatie, 1992). Some children saw a parent during the time of hiding, sometimes only once, sometimes infrequently in an unpredictable way; reunion after the war was sometimes delayed due to illness of the parents. Because all these reunions are part of the very discontinuous and unpredictable attachment relationships, we also coded narrative sections concerning reunions with parents and foster parents. The first excerpt in Table 1 shows how inseparable separation and reunion were.

Psychological trauma consists of extremely threatening experiences and later symptoms. Rubin et al. (2008) proposed that no special encoding deficits at the time of the original events account for PTSD symptoms, but that the quality of memories suffices to explain them. Therefore we used both PTSD symptoms as well as the remembered emotional qualities of the event—dangerousness and scariness—as predictors of narrative characteristics in trauma narratives. Exclusive prediction by remembered qualities of the event would indicate that the narrative characteristics are typical for extremely scary memories, whereas exclusive prediction by PTSD symptoms would indicate that the narrative characteristics are typical only for PTSD.

Method

Participants

We selected all 26 participants who had taken part in both of two earlier studies. One study had collected life narratives

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