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Self-report may underestimate trauma intrusions

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ABSTRACT

Research examining maladaptive responses to trauma routinely relies on spontaneous self-report to index intrusive thoughts, which assumes people accurately recognize and report their intrusive thoughts. However, “mind-wandering” research reveals people are not always meta-aware of their thought content: they often fail to notice shifts in their attention. In two experiments, we exposed subjects to trauma films, then instructed them to report intrusive thoughts during an unrelated reading task. Intermittently, we asked whether they were thinking about the trauma. As expected, subjects often spontaneously reported intrusive thoughts. However, they were also “caught” engaging in unreported trauma-oriented thoughts. The presence and frequency of intermittent probes did not influence self-caught intrusions. Both self-caught and probe-caught intrusions were related to an existing tendency toward intrusive cognition, film-related distress, and thought suppression attempts. Our data suggest people may lack meta-awareness of trauma-related thoughts, which has implications for theory, research and treatment relating to trauma-related psychopathology.

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1. Introduction

After exposure to a traumatic event, people often experience intrusive thoughts and memories of that event; such recurrent, distressing intrusive cognition is a ubiquitous feature of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD; [American Psychiatric Association, 2000, 2013](#)). Current practice for recording intrusive symptoms, in clinical settings and laboratory-based analogue trauma research, relies solely on people spontaneously self-reporting intrusive experiences. However, the “mind-wandering” literature (summarized below) indicates that people are not always accurate at tracking shifts in their attention ([Smallwood & Schooler, 2006](#)). Thus it is plausible that these procedures do not capture all instances of intrusive cognition; a possibility that has important implications for research on and treatment of intrusions. In two experiments, we investigated whether people sometimes fail to report when they are having an intrusive thought about a laboratory-based trauma analogue.

Involuntary memories of past experiences are one example of a broader category of spontaneous thought processes ([Rasmussen & Berntsen, 2009](#)). Although often cued by situational reminders, involuntary remembering occurs, by definition, without retrieval effort. Indeed, it is most likely to occur when attention is diffuse (e.g., [Schlagman, Kvavilashvili, & Schulz, 2007](#)). [Berntsen \(2009\)](#) argued that, generally speaking, involuntary memory is a functional mode of memory. For example, it can contribute to well-being by allowing people an automatic and non-effortful process by which to rehearse

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lessons from the past and prepare for the future, perhaps acting as a “warning signal” about the potential for danger (Ehlers, Hackmann, Steil, Clohessy, & Wenninger, 2002; cf. Hintzman, 2011).

Although involuntary memories that serve these functions can be positive or negative, research has tended to focus on memories for negative experiences because they feature in a range of disorders, including PTSD and other anxiety disorders, depression, and eating disorders (Wegner & Pennebaker, 1993). Such memories are often experienced as upsetting. Our focus is on the occurrence of unwanted intrusive cognition following exposure to trauma-like stimuli.

Much of the empirical research on intrusive cognition has relied on spontaneous self-report data. For example, people watch a trauma film and monitor their thoughts for a specified period, marking the occurrence of any intrusions by verbalizing the thought, raising a finger, or, in multi-session studies, recording information in a diary (Berntsen, 2001; Holmes, Brewin, & Hennessy, 2004; Horowitz, Becker, & Wilner, 1986; Nixon, Nehmy, & Seymour, 2007). Each procedure assumes that subjects have accurate meta-awareness of their own cognition. However, related research suggests that people do not always track the contents of their own consciousness.

Indeed, research demonstrates that people often engage in mind-wandering, “a shift of attention away from a primary task toward internal information, such as memories” (Smallwood & Schooler, 2006, p. 946). In doing so, they tend to lose track of the current focus of their attention, moving from task-related to task-unrelated thinking. Mind-wandering research highlights the potential importance of separating the frequency with which people *report* intrusions from the frequency with which they *experience* them. For example, Schooler, Reichle, and Halpern (2004) examined how often people’s attention drifted off-task while reading. “Mind-wandering” was measured in two ways (based on Schooler, 2002): (1) subjects self-reported whenever they noticed their mind had wandered (mind-wandering *with* awareness, as in prior studies of traumatic intrusions) and (2) subjects were intermittently asked whether their attention was off-task. These intermittent probes sometimes “caught” subjects engaging in task-unrelated thoughts the subject had not been spontaneously identified (mind-wandering *without* awareness). Of course, people were aware of the contents of their mind-wandering, but they were not meta-aware that they were mind-wandering (or they would have indicated as such). Furthermore, the more often participants lacked meta-awareness that their mind had wandered, the worse they performed on the concurrent task. The researchers argued that mind-wandering without awareness led to poorer reading comprehension, due to the decoupling of attention between the task and task-unrelated thinking (see also Smallwood, McSpadden, & Schooler, 2007).

Mind-wandering has conceptual overlap with involuntary cognition—including negative intrusions. Like involuntary memories, mind-wandering tends to occur when cognitive load is low, for example when people are carrying out an automatic or easy task and/or when they are not engaged in or motivated to perform a task (McVay & Kane, 2010). In addition, mind-wandering is particularly likely when people are experiencing negative mood (Smallwood, Fitzgerald, Miles, & Phillips, 2009).

Recently, Baird, Smallwood, Fishman, Mrazek, and Schooler (2013) applied the concept of mind-wandering to unwanted negative thoughts. They wondered whether people would have difficulty accurately identifying the experience of negative intrusions. During an unrelated reading task, subjects monitored intrusive thoughts about a prior romantic relationship, while simultaneously trying to suppress those thoughts. Again, the researchers measured intrusive thoughts using a combination of self-caught and probe-caught monitoring. Subjects were fairly often (14–22% across experiments) caught engaging in unwanted thoughts that they had not spontaneously reported.

Unlike traumas, prior romantic relationships are not uniformly negative and thoughts about them might be low in arousal (especially if the relationship ended long ago). We wondered whether we would see a similar pattern of results when the stimulus event was an analogue trauma: Would people sometimes fail to be meta-aware of, and hence fail to report, trauma-related intrusions? To test this question, we used a variation on the trauma film paradigm (Holmes & Bourne, 2008), first exposing subjects to a traumatic film and then monitoring their intrusive thoughts during a subsequent task. For this monitoring phase we used Schooler et al.’s (2004) reading task; asking subjects to read for comprehension but to self-report any off-task thoughts about the film (mind-wandering with awareness). We hypothesized that people would sometimes fail to recognize the occurrence of traumatic intrusions. To test this hypothesis, we intermittently asked subjects whether they were thinking about the film. We expected that these probes would occasionally “catch” subjects thinking about the film. In addition, to assess whether the presence of probes influenced the frequency with which people self-reported intrusions, we compared subjects exposed and not exposed to probes. Based on previous research, we expected one of two outcomes: (1) participants would self-catch a similar number of intrusions in the presence and absence of probes (Schooler et al., 2004) or (2) participants would self-catch more intrusions in the absence of probes because sometimes probes would catch thoughts *before* participants noticed them and thereby preclude subjects from eventually noticing and reporting those thoughts (see Baird et al., 2013). Finally, although it was not central to our aims in this paper, based on previous research we expected that the more often participants were caught thinking about the film—and hence, the more their attention was divided between the articles and the film—the poorer their reading comprehension would be.

2. Experiment 1

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Design

We employed a simple between-subjects design. We asked half our subjects to press a key when they noticed an intrusive thought (*self-caught only* condition); the remaining subjects were additionally exposed to thought-sampling probes (*self-*

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