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# Psychological causes of autobiographical amnesia: a study of 28 cases

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## Abstract

Autobiographical amnesia is found in patients with focal or diffuse brain damage ("organic amnesia"), but also without overt brain damage (at least when measured with conventional brain imaging methods). This last condition is usually named dissociative amnesia at present, and was originally described as hysteria. Classically and traditionally, dissociative amnesia is seen as a disorder that causes retrograde amnesia in the autobiographical domain in the aftermath of incidents of major psychological stress or trauma. In the present study one of the probably largest published collections of patients (28) with psychogenically caused autobiographical amnesia, who were assessed with comprehensive neuropsychological tests, will be described and documented in order to identify variables which are central for the occurrence of dissociative amnesia. The presented cases demonstrate that autobiographical amnesia without direct brain damage can have very mixed clinical presentations, causes and consequences. The described cases of psychogenic amnesia are clustered according to a number of manifestations and features, which include a reduced effort to perform cognitively at a normal level, a forensic background, anterograde (instead of retrograde) autobiographical amnesia, the fugue condition, concurrent somatic diseases, and their appearance in childhood and youth. It is concluded that autobiographical amnesia of a psychogenic origin may occur within a variety of symptom pictures. For all patients, it probably serves a protective function by offering them a mechanism to exit a life situation which appears to them unmanageable or adverse.

**Keywords:** Stress, Mild traumatic brain injury, Culture, Forensic context, Fugue, Effort, Anterograde amnesia

## 1. Introduction

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