

# Retrieval inhibition of trauma-related words in women reporting repressed or recovered memories of childhood sexual abuse

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## Abstract

Several authors have argued that survivors of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) who report to have repressed their traumatic memories are more skilled in forgetting emotional stimuli than survivors who have always remembered the abuse. The current experiment employed a list-wise directed forgetting task to investigate whether women reporting repressed ( $n = 16$ ) or recovered ( $n = 23$ ) memories of CSA are better at forgetting disturbing material, relative to women reporting having always remembered their abuse ( $n = 55$ ) or reporting no history of abuse ( $n = 20$ ). We found no support for the hypothesis that women reporting repressed or recovered memories of CSA are especially versed in inhibiting retrieval of trauma-related words. Additional analyses revealed that participants characterized by a repressive coping style did not display a superior retrieval inhibition mechanism for negative material.

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## Introduction

Some authors have argued that experiences may be so traumatic that victims deal with them in an avoidant-dissociative way (e.g., Terr, 1994). This style would enable survivors of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) to disengage attention from threatening stimuli and would result in impoverished, i.e., repressed or dissociated, memories of traumatic events (Harvey & Herman, 1994).

The concept of repressed or dissociated memories is controversial and has led to, what is sometimes dubbed, ‘the memory wars’ (e.g., Loftus, 1997; Schacter, 1995). On the one hand, many authors claim that amnesia for trauma and/or subsequent recovery of traumatic memories can be demonstrated in clinical populations

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(e.g., Brown, Schefflin, & Whitfield, 1999; Terr, 1994). A number of psychologists, on the other hand, have questioned the existence of repressed and recovered memories of trauma because of the lack of solid evidence for such memories (e.g., Kihlstrom, 2004; McNally, 2003a).

Some CSA survivors are capable of not thinking about their traumatic experiences for years (e.g., Cloitre, 2004). Yet, as pointed out by McNally (2003a), not thinking about a traumatic event is not the same as repressing memories of that event. Meanwhile, that some victims seem capable of not thinking about CSA for many years may imply that there are individual differences in the ability to keep unpleasant events out of awareness. In a series of studies, McNally, Clancy, and their colleagues (Clancy, McNally, & Schacter, 1999; Clancy, Schacter, McNally, & Pitman, 2000; McNally, 2001, 2003a, b, 2004; McNally, Clancy, Schacter, & Pitman, 2000; McNally, Metzger, Lasko, Clancy, & Pitman, 1998) explored whether those who report having recovered memories of abuse possess superior abilities to forget unwanted material relative to those who report having always remembered their abuse. In doing so, these researchers were the first to apply experimental methods to investigate memory functioning in people reporting repressed and recovered memories of CSA. One paradigm that they used in this way was directed forgetting (McNally, Clancy, Barrett, & Parker, 2004; McNally, Clancy, & Schacter, 2001). Some authors have suggested that this paradigm may be employed to study individual differences in the ability to put disturbing material out of consciousness (e.g., Bjork, 1989; Brewin & Andrews, 1998). In the typical directed forgetting experiment, participants are presented with words and they are instructed either to remember or to forget these words. Next, memory for both the to-be-remembered (TBR) and the to-be-forgotten (TBF) words is tested. The basic result in this paradigm is that when participants are given a surprise recall of the entire set of stimuli, they recall less of the TBF words than of the TBR words (Bjork, Bjork, & Anderson, 1998).

There are two versions of the directed forgetting paradigm. In the word method, words are assigned TBF or TBR by instructions given immediately after presentation of each word. McNally et al. (2001) used this version to examine forgetting of trauma-related words in women who believed they had repressed or recovered memories of CSA, and women who reported no history of abuse. Since this version especially taps encoding mechanisms (Basden, Basden, & Gargano, 1993), McNally and co-workers examined whether these groups differed in their ability to intentionally avoid the encoding of neutral (e.g., stairs), positive (e.g., elation), and trauma-related (e.g., incest) words when instructed to do so. McNally et al. (2001) replicated the standard directed forgetting effect. That is, less TBF than TBR words were recalled. However, groups did not differ in their forgetting abilities, even when the emotional valence of the words was taken into account. These results suggest that women with repressed or recovered memories are not characterized by a superior ability to avoid the encoding of trauma-related words.

A second version of the directed forgetting paradigm is the list method. Here, participants are instructed midway through the presentation of words to forget the first half of the list (the TBF set) and to remember the second half of the list (the TBR set). When forget instructions are given in this way, an evenhanded amount of processing would have already been allocated to the TBF words. Therefore, with this method, retrieval is thought to be inhibited on subsequent recall tests. Such retrieval inhibition would render the TBF words temporarily less accessible (Bjork, 1989). This method was used in a recent study of McNally et al. (2004) that relied on people who reported repressed, recovered or continuous (i.e., permanently accessible) memories of CSA or who had no history of abuse. In line with previous findings, less TBF than TBR words were recalled, while, overall, trauma-related words were better remembered than positive words. Again, this pattern suggests that CSA survivors, including those reporting repressed and recovered memories, are not superior at inhibiting retrieval of trauma-related words.

The present study sought to replicate and extend the results of McNally et al. (2004). Using the list-method version of the directed forgetting paradigm, we investigated whether women who reported having forgotten their sexual abuse (i.e., repressed and recovered memory group) display a superior ability to inhibit retrieval of trauma-related words relative to participants who had never forgotten their abuse or who said they had never been abused. A subsidiary aim of our study was to explore whether a repressive coping style (e.g., Derakshan & Eysenck, 1997) is related to heightened retrieval inhibition. Repressive copers (or repressors) are people who do not easily report negative affect, but who do respond physiologically to emotional stimuli (Myers, 2000). Interestingly, there is tentative evidence that repressors exhibit more directed forgetting than nonrepressors, but only so for negative material (Myers, Brewin, & Power, 1998). With this in mind, we examined whether

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