

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

**The Role of Unsafe Schemas and Insecure Attachment
Responses in PTSD Symptomatology After Traumatic
Adulthood Experiences**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Psychology at Massey University,
Palmerston North, New Zealand.

Teesha Passmore
2002

ABSTRACT

The most common disorder resulting from trauma is posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Empirical research affirms the effectiveness of several cognitive-behavioural therapies in treating PTSD symptomatology; however additional complications including interpersonal difficulties, treatment resistance and the simultaneous development of other disorders, such as depression and alcoholism, often impedes the effective treatment of PTSD. The aim of the present study was to provide a deeper understanding of specific cognitive-emotional schemas related to PTSD symptomatology. Unsafe schemas involving perceptions of severe threat regarding a person's sense of safety, control and invulnerability; and internal working models (IWMs) involving generalized attachment related perceptions and feelings regarding the self and others, were the schemas that were investigated.

Participants were volunteers from the general community, responding to written or verbal advertisements regarding the study. A total of 188 participants filled out four self-report questionnaires about their own psychological and behavioural responses to a past traumatic event. The questionnaires gathered demographic data, details about the traumatic event and information about the degree to which PTSD symptoms, unsafe schemas and IWMs were elicited.

The findings indicated that a threatened sense of control was the highest significant predictor for both intensity and length of time of PTSD symptoms. Although moderately strong significant correlations were found between PTSD symptomatology and the other unsafe schemas (threatened safety and threatened invulnerability) these variables did not predict intensity or length of time that PTSD symptoms were experienced.

Negative IWMs of others predicted both intensity and length of time of PTSD, whereas negative IWMs of the self predicted only intensity of PTSD symptoms. Positive IWMs did not significantly predict PTSD symptomatology.

Several other statistical comparisons confirmed that unsafe schemas and negative IWMs of others both appear to play a significant role in chronicity of post-traumatic symptomatology.

The findings generated several important practical implications for the treatment of traumatized individuals, which were discussed along with limitations of the study and directions for future research. Potential explanations for the findings of the research in relation to previous research findings were also proposed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all I must acknowledge and sincerely thank all of the participants who made this project possible. Many of you went back to a tragic time and place in your lives to share your experiences in hope that your adversities may advance knowledge about the effects of trauma. I feel indebted and will be ever grateful to the large number of you who opened up such a chapter in your lives to recall your behaviours, thoughts and feelings during these difficult times.

I would like to thank Dr Robert Gregory for your support, patience and encouragement while supervising this research project over the year. Although supervision was at a distance, I am grateful for your prompt replies, expertise and kind and encouraging words whenever assistance was required.

Finally, a sincere thank you to family and friends who have provided unconditional support and encouragement throughout the year. In particular thank you David and Renée for your patience, love and support, which provided me with the foundation required to embark on this enriching and wonderful learning experience.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	i
Acknowledgements	iii
Table of Contents	iv
List of Tables	vi
List of Appendices	vii
Chapter 1. Trauma	1
1.1 Introduction.....	1
1.2 Prevalence of trauma.....	6
1.3 Trauma in New Zealand.....	9
1.4 What is a traumatic event?.....	11
Chapter 2. Psychological Reactions to Trauma	15
2.1 Introduction.....	15
2.2 Influencing Factors in Psychological Responses to Trauma.....	16
2.3 Immediate Reactions to Trauma.....	18
2.4 Long-term Responses to Trauma.....	21
2.5 Posttraumatic Stress Disorder.....	23
Chapter 3. Understanding PTSD: Theories and Explanations	28
3.1 Introduction.....	28
3.2 Theories of PTSD.....	28
3.2.1 Learning Theories.....	28
3.2.2 Emotional Processing Theories.....	29
3.2.3 Information Processing Model.....	30
3.2.4 Social-Cognitive Perspectives.....	31
3.3 Introducing Unsafe Cognitive-Emotional Schemas.....	33
3.4 Can Research Support the Role of Unsafe Schemas in PTSD?.....	35
3.5 Conclusion.....	39

Chapter 4. Internal Working Models	40
4.1 Introduction.....	40
4.2 The Attachment Behavioural System.....	41
4.3 IWMs in Childhood.....	45
4.4 IWMs in Adulthood.....	47
4.5 Assessment of Adult Attachment Styles.....	47
Chapter 5. IWMs, Unsafe Schemas and PTSD	53
5.1 Introduction.....	53
5.2 IWMs of Others and Unsafe Schemas.....	55
5.3 IWMs of the Self and Unsafe Schemas.....	56
5.4 Goals of the Present Study.....	58
Chapter 6. Method	61
6.1 Procedure.....	61
6.2 Research Participants.....	63
6.3 Measures.....	65
6.3.1 Stressful Event Questionnaire (SEQ).....	65
6.3.2 Stanford Acute Stress Reaction Questionnaire (SASRQ).....	66
6.3.3 Experience of Trauma Inventory (ETI).....	68
6.3.4 Attachment Style Questionnaire (ASQ).....	69
Chapter 7. Results	72
7.1 Experiences of Trauma.....	72
7.2 Statistical Analysis.....	77
7.3 PTSD Symptomatology.....	78
7.4 Post-Traumatic Responses and Demographic Variables.....	80
7.5 Bivariate Relationships.....	81
7.6 The Impact of Unsafe Schemas and IWMs on PTSD Symptoms.....	84
7.7 Statistical Comparisons Between Diagnostic Groups.....	87
7.8 Statical Comparisons Between Attachment Style Responses to Trauma.....	89

Chapter 8. Discussion	92
8.1 Introduction.....	92
8.2 Demographic Composition of the Sample.....	92
8.3 Demographic Variables and Post-Traumatic Responses.....	94
8.4 Relating Statistical Findings to the Goals of the Study.....	95
8.4.1 Goal 1.....	95
8.4.2 Goal 2.....	100
8.4.3 Goal 3.....	102
8.4.4 Goal 4.....	103
8.5 Factors Limiting the Present Study.....	105
8.6 Practical Implications of the Current Research.....	107
8.7 Future Research Directions.....	111
8.8 Conclusion.....	114

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: DSM-IV Diagnostic Criteria for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder.....	13
Table 2: DSM-IV Diagnostic Criteria for Acute Stress Disorder.....	26
Table 3: Demographic and Occupational Status of Research Sample.....	64
Table 4: Traumatic Events Referred to by Research Sample.....	73
Table 5: SASRQ Responses After a Traumatic Event.....	78
Table 6: Diagnostic Status of Research Sample.....	79
Table 7: Correlations of PTSD Symptomatology With Unsafe Schemas and IWMs.....	82

Table 8: Correlations Between PTSD Symptom Variables and Schema Variables....	83
Table 9: Correlations Between Unsafe Schema Variables and IWM Variables.....	84
Table 10: Regression Coefficients (and adjusted R ² value) for Unsafe Schemas and IWMs.....	85
Table 11: Regression Coefficients (and adjusted R ² value) for Specific Unsafe Schemas and IWM Variables.....	86
Table 12: Mean Scores and F Ratios for Unsafe Schemas and IWM Variables for Diagnostic Groups.....	88
Table 13: Means and Standard Deviations of Unsafe Schemas and IWMs for Chronic and Non-Chronic Diagnostic Groups.....	89
Table 14: Means and F Ratios of PTSD Symptoms and Unsafe Schemas for Attachment Style Reactions to Trauma.....	90

LIST OF APPENDICES

APPENDIX A - Advertisement.....	135
APPENDIX B - Information Sheet.....	136
APPENDIX C - Stressful Events Questionnaire.....	140
APPENDIX D - Stanford Acute Stress Reaction Questionnaire.....	143
APPENDIX E - Experience of Trauma Inventory.....	146
APPENDIX F - Attachment Styles Questionnaire.....	148