Characteristics of Involuntary Memories in the Adult Attachment Interview’s Insecure-Dissingrming and Unresolved Categories

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Theoretical background

The Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; Main & Goldwyn, 1985) was first designed to assess an individual’s state of mind with regard to attachment and is now regarded as the “gold standard” for capturing adults’ Internal Working Model (IWM) of attachment on the level of representation. The IWM of attachment refers to an individual’s model of others as supportive and available, and of oneself as worthy of support in times of need and emotional stress. According to Bowlby (1973), it results from the internalisation of patterns of emotionally charged experiences with caregivers and from defensive processes occurring along that process and during accessing the model in times of emotional stress across the life-cycle. IWMs are regarded as “relatively or completely unconscious” (ibid., p. 239).

The AAI (George, Kaplan, & Main, 1985) “surprises the Unconscious” by eliciting memories of childhood experiences with attachment figures. Attachment categories derived from the narratives are divided into “organised” (i.e. secure, insecure-dismissing, or insecure-enmeshed/preoccupied) and “disorganised”, i.e. Unresolved with regard to Loss or Trauma.

Insecure-dismissing individuals demonstrate limited access to childhood memories and high levels of idealisation of past experiences, whereas the narratives receiving an Unresolved classification are characterised by breakdowns in the monitoring of reasoning and/or discourse, and of behavioural breakdown in response to loss or trauma (Main & Goldwyn, 2002). Prevalence of Unresolved attachment is particularly high in clinical groups (Bakermans-Kranenburg & v. Ijzendoorn, 2009), most notably in borderline personality disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Parental Unresolved attachment status is a risk factor for infant and child development (e.g. Madigan et al., 2006).

Fearon & Mansell (2001) highlighted parallels between phenomena observed both in Unresolved loss and in PTSD, i.e. dissociation, distorted memories and intrusive memories. They reflect a failure to integrate the loss experience into autobiographical memory (Brewin, 2011), and may account for the lapses observed in AAI Unresolved narratives.

Mentalization, i.e. the capacity to interpret human behaviour in terms of intentional mental states (e.g. needs, desires, feelings, goals; Fonagy et al., 2002), is also disturbed both in PTSD and in Unresolved attachment status. Sharp and colleagues (2012) argue that impaired mentalizing capacity may account for difficulties in the processing of, and adjustment to, current trauma, including the loss of a loved one through death. Along these lines, German psychoanalyst Ermann (2007) proposes that what most requires mentalization are emotional states of an overwhelming quality which are connected with preverbal experiences. The inability to label those emotional states constitutes the cause for a lack of mentalization, while the failure to mentalize also fulfills a defensive purpose. We hypothesize that the loss of a loved one, which in itself can be an overwhelming emotional experience, re-activates pre-reflexive and preverbal, potentially overwhelming, emotional states – as expressed by high emotional arousal, accompanied by an inability to label the quality of an emotional experience – which in turn interfere with the resolution of the loss itself.

Hypotheses

1. Individuals with an insecure-dismissing attachment representation are found to idealise emotional experiences and deny their negative aspects. During a standardised task to elicit involuntary memories, individuals classified as insecure-dismissing are hypothesised to label a higher number of involuntary memories as ‘positive’ than individuals classified as secure. This will be particularly true in negative emotional contexts (neg. or loss-related cue words).

2. Individuals who are classified as Unresolved in the AAI following the loss of a close friend or relative will experience involuntary memories in the task which are a) more vivid and b) more negative than individuals who are classified as not-Unresolved at least 2 years following bereavement. This applies particularly to memories elicited in response to negative or loss-related cue words.

3. Individuals who are classified as Unresolved in the AAI will report more highly vivid involuntary memories which they label as ‘neutral’ than individuals not classified as Unresolved. This will be particularly true for memories produced in response to loss-related cue words.

Methods

Sample: 30 adults (16 men) aged between 25 and 52 years (M = 34.3) were recruited through University College London’s subject pool. Only individuals who had experienced at least one loss of a close friend or relative over the last 2 to 5 years were included.

Procedure: A standardised task to elicit involuntary memories was conducted, followed by the Adult Attachment Interview.

Attachment status was assessed using the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; George et al., 1985), which was coded according to the AAI manual by Main et al. (2002). Scales assessing state of mind re-attachment include coherence of the narrative, idealisation, Unresolved loss, and Unresolved trauma. AAI coding yields 4 categories: Secure, Insecure-Dismissing, Insecure-Preoccupied, and Unresolved regarding loss or trauma.

Quality of involuntary memories elicited in a laboratory situation was captured using the Continuous Word Association Task (CWAT; Ball, 2007; Brewin & Soni, 2011). Participants were given positive, negative, and loss-related cue words and were asked to generate successive word associations for 30 sec. for each cue word. After each 30-sec. period they were asked to report any involuntary memories which they had experienced while finding word associations, and to rate valence and vividness of those memories.

Results

Distribution of AAI categories. 53% (n=16) of our participants were classified as Unresolved, 17% (n=5) as insecure-dismissing, whereas 30% (n=9) had a secure attachment status. All those classified as insecure-preoccupied were also Unresolved.

H1: Number of involuntary memories labelled as ‘positive’ depending on cue word and attachment classification

H2: Vividness of involuntary memories depending on Unresolved vs. not-Unresolved attachment status

H3: Valence of involuntary memories depending on Unresolved vs. not-Unresolved attachment status

Summary & Conclusion

1. Two to five years following bereavement, individuals with an insecure-dismissing attachment status label the memories which they produce in response to a word association task as more positive than individuals receiving other attachment classifications. This occurs mainly in negative and loss-related emotional contexts.

2. Individuals with Unresolved attachment status tend to report more vivid memories in response to a standardised task than participants not classified as Unresolved. They also demonstrate a lower threshold for producing negative memories – not only in response to loss-related, but also in response to generally negative cue words.

3. Individuals with an Unresolved attachment status fail to label the vivid involuntary memories they experience in a standardised task as positive or negative. Instead, they label these memories as ‘neutral’.
References:


