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CORRESPONDENCE

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To the Editor:

Pope *et al.* (2007) claim that there is no evidence of dissociative amnesia, i.e. forgetfulness for traumatic experience, prior to 1800. They start with a false dichotomy, between the definition of dissociative amnesia in the DSM-IV-TR (APA, 2000, p. 520), and that mentioned as an accompanying symptom to somatization disorder (p. 490). They claim to have cast a broad and technologically sophisticated net to catch any evidence of amnesia for trauma before 1800. I was therefore surprised not to have heard about their 'search', until after their article was published, despite my active research and interest in dissociative amnesia and frequent trolling of the internet. The authors claim that none of the 'more than 100' replies meets their criteria, for a host of reasons.

Their premise and conclusion seemed sufficiently implausible that I spent a few minutes on the internet, searching for evidence of amnesia for trauma antedating 1800. According to Wikipedia,

> In Classical Greek, *Lethe* (λήθε; LEE-thee) literally means 'forgetfulness' or 'concealment'. The Greek word for 'truth' is *a-lethe-ia* (αλήθεια), meaning 'un-forgetfulness' or 'un-concealment'.
>
> In Greek mythology, Lethe is one of the several rivers of Hades. Drinking from the river Lethe ('forgetfulness' or 'oblivion') caused complete forgetfulness. Some ancient Greeks believed that souls were made to drink from the river before being reincarnated, so they would not remember their past lives.

In *The Divine Comedy*, the stream of Lethe flows to the centre of the earth from its surface, but its headwaters are located in the Earthly Paradise found at the top of the mountain of Purgatory. In William Shakespeare's play *Julius Caesar*, Antony, on seeing the murderers' hands red with Caesar's blood, observes: 'Here didst thou fall; and here thy hunters stand,/ Sign'd in thy spoil, and crimson'd in thy Lethe' (III.i.215). Additionally, the character of Sebastian refers to Lethe in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*: 'Let fancy still my sense in Lethe steep; If it be thus to dream, still let me sleep!' (IV.ii.61).

In Book X of the Republic, The Myth of Er, Plato (Plato 1970, *c.* 1961) talks of the fallen hero Er, son of Armenius, who was slain in battle but returned to life and talked of what he had seen in the other world. He reported how various famous individuals had chosen a new life that evaded or punished those who had harmed them:

> Orpheus choosing the life of a swan out of enmity to the race of women, hating to be born of a woman because they had been his murderers. … The next was Agamemnon, who took the life of an eagle, because, like Ajax, he hated human nature by reason of his sufferings … without turning round they passed beneath the throne of Necessity; and when they had all passed, they marched on in a scorching heat to the plain of Forgetfulness, which was a barren waste destitute of trees and verdure; and then towards evening they encamped by the river of Unmindfulness, whose water no vessel can hold; of this they were all obliged to drink a certain quantity, and those who were not saved by wisdom drank more than was necessary; and each one as he drank forgot all things.

These multiple classical references to the balm of amnesia for trauma seem clear enough. Hudson *et al.* overlook or dismiss writings that fail to support their thesis that dissociative amnesia is a relatively recent 'culture-bound' phenomenon rather than a fact of human existence. We have only had the term 'schizophrenia' since Bleuler used it to describe the split between thought and affect (Bleuler, 1908), but I don't hear Pope *et al.* claiming that this particular form of thought disorder is 'culture-bound' because it was not described as such before 1800. There is ample evidence of

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functional amnesia for traumatic events (Spiegel & Cardena, 1991; Briere & Conte, 1993; Classen *et al*. 1993; Schacter *et al*. 1996; Bryant *et al*. 2001; Kritchevsky *et al*. 2004), and even a neurobiological mechanism for it linking activation of frontal cortex to inhibition of the hippocampus (Anderson *et al*. 2004). Dissociative phenomena antedate the field of psychiatry and its skeptics. Let's not forget that.

Declaration of Interest

None.

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The Authors reply:

We thank Dr Spiegel for his letter, but would note that none of the characters that he cites in Greek mythology, nor those in *Julius Caesar* or *Twelfth Night*, nor the characters described by Plato, meets or even approaches the specific criteria, detailed in our published paper (Pope *et al*. 2007) and in our posted repression 'challenge' (http://www.biopsychlab.com) – namely a written description of an individual (fictional or non-fictional) who experienced a *specific traumatic event*, and then was demonstrably *unable to remember* that specific traumatic event and subsequently *recovered the memory* of that event. Instead, all of Dr Spiegel's examples refer to loss of memory generically, or to loss of memory for entire past lives, rather than loss of memory for a specific traumatic event, and further, none involves recovery of a formerly inaccessible memory of a specific traumatic event. Indeed, in our published paper we have already cited Plato (Plato, *c*. 380 B.C.), and explained why his concept of anamnesis – the amnesia of reincarnated souls for their past lives – does not meet our criteria for 'dissociative amnesia'.

We should consider two objections that might be raised in response to our above statement. First, it might be objected that we have 'set the bar too high' by insisting on a graphic, concrete case of someone who experienced a specific traumatic event and was demonstrably unable to remember it. But as shown in our paper, such cases are easily found in 19th- and 20th-century fiction and non-fiction, as illustrated for example by the 1896 case of Penn in *Captains Courageous* cited in our paper (Kipling, 1896), and in numerous 20th-century works, including of course many screenplays where characters experience 'flashbacks' and ultimately recover 'repressed memories' (see http://www.imdb.com/keyword/repressed-memory). Thus, if 'dissociative amnesia' were a natural human psychological phenomenon, it would be equally reasonable to expect similar clear, concrete examples of amnesia for traumatic events, followed by recovery of memory, in literature before 1800.

A second possible objection is that our ancestors conceived of the psyche and of memory very differently from ourselves. Therefore, it might be contended, we should not expect to find concrete, black-and-white examples of 'dissociative amnesia' before 1800, and at best we should expect only generic discussions of

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amnesia or forgetfulness, or texts that merely suggest or imply the possibility of 'dissociative amnesia' – such as those cited by Spiegel. However, our paper already offers a detailed discussion of the flaws in this argument. Specifically, we note that it is not necessary to conceive of something in order to describe it. Our ancestors regularly described traumatic events, and frequently described individuals with amnesia, and therefore would have been equally capable of describing an individual who experienced a traumatic event and then exhibited amnesia for it, even if they did not understand the phenomenon that they were describing. By analogy, our ancestors had very different notions of delusions and hallucinations from those that we have today, yet descriptions of delusions and hallucinations are readily recognizable in works before 1800. We point out that if dissociative amnesia truly occurred before 1800, it too would be recognizable.

Our paper further notes that

> dissociative amnesia is a graphic and striking phenomenon; if an otherwise lucid individual spontaneously develops complete amnesia for a serious traumatic event, such as being raped or witnessing the death of loved ones, then a description of such a case would surely be recognizable, even through a dense veil of cultural interpretation. In other words, historical literature would include not just oblique religious or supernatural references to dissociative amnesia, or cases that merely showed certain features of it; one would also find clearly recognizable cases. Similarly, one would find not just modern commentaries that see hints or suggestions of dissociative amnesia in historical works; one would be able to distinguish clear-cut cases in the historical works themselves (Pope *et al*. 2007, p. 230).

We carefully wrote these sentences to make it clear to readers why cases such as those of Dr Spiegel do *not* provide legitimate evidence of 'dissociative amnesia', but he does not appear to address these important points in the course of his letter.

We also believe that there are several logical flaws in Dr Spiegel's arguments. For example, he cites Anderson *et al*. (2004) as evidence of a neurobiological mechanism for 'dissociative amnesia'. But this was merely a study of college students who attempted to avoid thinking about neutral target words; as others have commented, it is unreasonable to generalize from such studies to the inability of traumatized people to recall their worst experiences (Schacter, 2001; McNally, 2003). Second, Spiegel states that 'dissociative phenomena antedate the field of psychiatry and its skeptics'. We agree – but as we have noted elsewhere (Pope *et al*. in press), the non-specific term 'dissociative phenomena' embraces many ordinary and long-recognized symptoms, such as depersonalization or deficits of attention. Therefore, the existence of 'dissociative phenomena' generically does not validate the existence of 'dissociative amnesia' in particular, any more than the existence of hoofed mammals validates the existence of unicorns. Third, Dr Spiegel notes that 'schizophrenia' was not described before 1800. But it is not logical to draw a parallel between the *term* 'schizophrenia', and the *symptom* of being unable to remember a traumatic event. As noted on our paper, symptoms associated with 'schizophrenia', such as delusions and hallucinations, are widely documented in written works throughout the ages, because they are indeed naturally occurring human psychological phenomena. However, the symptom of experiencing a specific traumatic event, and then being unable to remember that event, and then recovering the memory of that event, does not appear in any written work, to our knowledge, before 1800.

Therefore, we would offer the challenge back to Dr Spiegel and other interested readers, to produce a simple, straightforward, concrete case of 'dissociative amnesia' before 1800, or else explain how it could be that no such concrete cases exist.

Declaration of Interest

None.

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To the Editor:
In a recent ingenious paper Harrison Pope and colleagues (2007) used a web-based challenge to complement their own investigations into verifiable cases of repressed memories. Pope and colleagues note they have (1) not found any verifiable examples of repressed memories in real people, and (2) that repressed memories appear to have arisen as literary notion in the late eighteenth century. The example below from Act V, Scene 3 of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* shows that literary musings on repressed memories date at least back to the very beginning of the seventeenth century, while, in Shakespeare's wonderful ambiguity leaving open the question of repressed memories in real people. Also, unbelievably, Shakespeare presages the modern controversy in academic, medical and lay public about repressed memories.

MACBETH. How does your patient, doctor?
DOCTOR. Not so sick, my lord,
As she is troubled with thick-coming fancies,
That keep her from her rest.
MACBETH. Cure her of that.
Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased,
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
Raze out the written troubles of the brain,
And with some sweet oblivious antidote
Cleanse the stuff'd bosom of that perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart?
DOCTOR. Therein the patient
Must minister to himself.

Declaration of Interest

None.

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The Authors' reply
Certainly, *Macbeth* speaks to the issue of memory for traumatic events. However, we would suggest that the passage from Act V is not a 'literary musing on repressed memory', but rather a graphic illustration that one *cannot* repress a memory. Lady Macbeth is utterly unable to forget her complicity in murdering Duncan, much as she might wish to do so. Indeed, in a previous scene, she laments that 'all the perfumes of Arabia' cannot erase the smell of Duncan's blood from her hands (Shakespeare, 1605). Thus, Shakespeare, like writers before him (see Quintas Smyrnaeus, 4th century A.D. in Pope *et al*. 2007), portrays the age-old *wish* that one could somehow erase the memory of traumatic events, but does not suggest that one actually can do so. Indeed, if spontaneous amnesia for traumatic events were a natural human psychological phenomenon, why would Shakespeare have never portrayed it in any character anywhere in his plays?

That said, we would like to take this opportunity to inform readers that we have found cases suggestive of repressed memory in two fictional works (de Laclos, 1782; Marsollier, 1786) from France in the 1780s – the heyday of mesmerism (Darnton, 1968). Both cases display features of delirium and widespread amnesia rather than pure repressed memory, but we have nevertheless awarded our $1000 prize to the opera 'Nina' (Marsollier, 1786), because it

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