One hundred years ago, in 1889, Pierre Janet published L'Automatisme Psychologique, his first work to deal with how the mind processes traumatic experiences. Janet claimed that vehement emotions interfere with proper appraisal and appropriate action. Failure to confront the experience fully leads to dissociation of the traumatic memories and their return as fragmentary reliving experiences: feeling states, somatic sensations, visual images, and behavioral reenactments. A century later, Janet still provides an unsurpassed framework for integrating current knowledge about the psychodynamic, cognitive, and biological effects of human traumatization.

KEY WORDS: Janet; post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); dissociation; memory; history of psychiatry; cognitive psychology.

PIERRE JANET ON POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS

It is ironic that in the closing decades of the 20th century psychiatry is slowly rediscovering a knowledge base about the effects of traumatization on psychological processes that was central to European conceptions of psychopathology during the last decades of the previous century. While numerous French and British psychiatrists studied the relationships between trauma and “hysteria” during that time (Trimble, 1981), the teachings of Jean Marie Charcot at the Salpêtrière most clearly focused that generation’s attention on the psychological effects of overwhelming experiences.

The idea that some mental disorders are caused by traumatic events, however, antedates the heyday of the Salpêtrière and has been around since

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the time of Homer. A variety of studies during the 19th century first brought scientific methods to bear on the question of how trauma affects the human psyche (Carlson, 1986; Ellenberger, 1970; van der Hart & Horst, 1989). By the end of the 19th century, psychiatrists in both Europe and the United States had become intensely interested in defining the relationships between psychological trauma and psychopathology (Nemiah, 1984; Perry and Laurence, 1984). In America, this issue occupied such people as William James and Morton Prince, while in Europe, Charcot's teachings stimulated both Janet and Freud to focus their early theories on the impact of traumatic experiences.

Early in this century, the study of psychological and biological processes in psychopathology took divergent paths. While Janet's integrative approach enjoyed a brief vogue, Freud's conceptions went on to dominate psychiatry for much of this century. The central psychoanalytic tenet that most psychopathology is the result of a childhood intrapsychic conflict between unacknowledged instinctual drives and external reality left little room for an integrated understanding of the emotional, cognitive, and biological effects of human traumatization. Abraham Kardiner (1941) attempted such an integration by augmenting the psychoanalytic model with his notion that the human trauma response is a "physioneurosis," i.e., a mental disorder with both psychological and biological components. Only recently have students of trauma started to reach back beyond Freud to Janet's work which may contain an as yet unsurpassed synthesis of the transformation of traumatic experiences into psychopathology.

In 1889, Janet published *L'Automatisme Psychologique* (Janet, 1889). His basic argument was that when a person experiences emotions which overwhelm his capacity to take appropriate action, the memory of this traumatic experience can not be properly digested: it is split off from consciousness and dissociated, to return later as fragmentary reliving of the trauma, as emotional conditions, somatic states, visual images, or behavioral reenactments. Janet was the first to identify dissociation as the crucial psychological mechanism involved in the genesis of a wide variety of post traumatic symptoms (Janet, 1889, 1894a, 1898, 1907, 1909a, 1911).

**JANET'S CAREER**

Janet started out as a philosophy teacher who, like several other noted contemporaries, such as the philosopher Henri Bergson, was very interested in the nature of hysteria. His detailed studies of several hysterical patients were so well received that Charcot asked him to come to the Salpêtrière,