

**HEMISPHERIC ASYMMETRY AND INFORMATION  
PROCESSING IN  
POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER**

*Thesis submitted for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy*

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*March 2008*



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## Abstract

Previous studies have suggested that mechanisms for neural compensation involve a reorganisation to right hemisphere processing in people with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and are associated with functional alterations in the capacity for behavioural flexibility. However, research has not established a direct relationship between the complex physiological and psychological processes of the heterogeneous disorder and right hemisphere cortical activity. The present study examined cognitive information processing in people with PTSD, reaction patterns associated with perceived traumatic stressors, and quantitative electroencephalographic (qEEG) indices of hemispheric asymmetry.

Individuals with PTSD (N=34) and age and sex-matched normal controls (N=136) completed standardised web-based self-report questionnaires assessing traumatic stressor events and reaction patterns to those events. Neuropsychological indices of verbal, visuospatial, sensori-motor performance, and electrophysiological recordings, were examined for right hemisphere coding. The relationships among traumatic characteristic reaction patterns of numbing and avoidance, cognitive performance, and frontal and posterior EEG alpha asymmetry were also investigated.

Structural and functional alterations were shown in those with PTSD, using indices of working memory for the retrieval of verbal and psychomotor information, indicating a reduced speed of processing and alterations to background cortical arousal in left hemisphere frontal regions. The study supported and extended previous findings of verbal working memory abnormality, alterations to left frontal cortical rhythmic oscillations, and low EEG alpha amplitudes in those diagnosed with PTSD. Results indicated a pattern of compensatory mechanisms associated with reduced speed of information processing and right-sided activation patterns in PTSD participants and control participants who experienced strong reactions to perceived traumatic events.

Findings support the impact of traumatic events on psychobiological health in high-risk populations, implicating an association with specific patterns of neural and cognitive functioning in characteristic numbing and avoidance behaviours.



## Declaration

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university and to the best of my knowledge and belief the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being available for loan and photocopying.

Therese Mayo

March 2008

## Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge and sincerely thank Professor Alexander McFarlane for his guidance and continued support throughout the project. Professor McFarlane provided the opportunity to carry out this research and set the platform for a high benchmark that was made possible only with his supervision, direction, helpful comments, and positive encouragement in our quest to further the field of knowledge in this area of research.

I would like to acknowledge and thank the Brain Resource Company ([www.brainresource.com](http://www.brainresource.com)) for permission to use the Brain Resource International Database. I would also sincerely like to thank Professor C. Richard Clark for his support, provision of training, expertise, and facilitation with data collection as part of a larger undertaking in neurocognitive research. The study participants, and the support and encouragement of the staff at Flinders University Cognitive Neuroscience Laboratory and School of Psychology, are also duly acknowledged.

I would like to thank Dr Geoff Schrader and staff of the Psychiatry Department, Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Woodville, for their support and professional inclusion. I would particularly like to thank Irene Paull for psychology training, expert advice during therapy session with PTSD patients, and for her encouragement to finish.

In general there are numerous other acknowledgements of assistance, encouragement and support I wish to make. Special mention and thanks to the staff at the University of Adelaide, Department of Public Health for specialist statistical advice, and to colleagues and friends, in particular, Alan Burns, who provided training in Microsoft Excel and technical computing assistance. A special acknowledgement also goes to those who were brave enough to attempt to proof-read draft copies – they know who they are. Finally I would like to thank my family for being so patient.