

The Role of Trauma and Dissociation on Political Decision-Making

Politik Karar Almada Travma ve Dissosiyasyonun Rolü

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ABSTRACT This article comprehensively examines the multifaceted effects of trauma and dissociation on political decision-making processes. Traumatic events weaken individuals' and societies' ability to reason, leading to irrational decisions. Traumatized individuals and communities may tend to gravitate toward authoritarian figures under the influence of past experiences. In individuals exposed to chronic trauma, insecure attachment and the phenomenon of "trauma bonding" increase the tendency to obey authoritarian leaders. Dissociative processes resulting from traumatic experiences affect the perception of reality on both individual and societal levels, making masses more susceptible to manipulation. Trauma and dissociation negatively impact cognitive functions and emotional regulation skills, hindering rational decision-making. In this context, the concept of dissociative revolutions is presented as a solution for individuals and societies to reclaim their psychosocial freedom. Psychosocial intervention strategies, such as trauma-informed education and psychocommunal therapy, can help prevent the spread of dissociative obedience, contributing to the development of more resilient societies to manipulation.

Keywords: Trauma; dissociation; political decision-making; dissoanalysis; mass dissociation

ÖZET Bu makale, travma ve dissosiyasyonun siyasi karar alma süreçleri üzerindeki çok yönlü etkilerini kapsamlı bir şekilde incelemektedir. Travmatik olaylar, bireylerin ve toplumların muhakeme yete-
neğini zayıflatarak irrasyonel kararlar alınmasına yol açar. Travmatize olmuş bireyler ve toplumlar, geçmiş yaşantılarının etkisiyle otoriter figürlere yönelme eğilimi gösterebilir. Kronik travmaya maruz kalan bireylerde gelişen güvensiz bağlanma ve "istismarcıya bağlanma" durumu, otoriter liderlere itaat etme eğilimini artırabilir. Travmatik yaşantılar sonucu ortaya çıkan dissosiyatif süreçler bireysel ve toplumsal düzeyde kitlelerin manipülasyona açık hale gelmesine yol açar. Travma ve dissosiyasyon, bilişsel işlevleri ve duygu düzenleme becerilerini olumsuz etkileyerek, rasyonel karar vermeyi engelleyebilir. Bu bağlamda, dissosiyatif devrimler kavramı, bireylerin ve toplumların psikososyal özgürlüklerini geri kazanmaları için bir çözüm olarak önerilebilir. Travma merkezli psikoeğitim ve psikokomünal terapi gibi müdahale stratejileri, dissosiyatif itaatin yayılmasını engelleyerek manipülasyona daha dirençli toplumlar oluşturulmasına katkı sağlayabilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Travma; dissosiyasyon; siyasi karar alma; dissoanaliz; kitlesel dissosiyasyon

In recent years, the influence of trauma and dissociation on political decision-making processes has garnered increasing attention. However, it remains insufficiently addressed by policymakers and the general public at large. The relationship between psychological factors and political behavior is crucial for understanding the dynamics of governance and how past experiences shape current policy preferences and actions.¹ It is known that trauma and dissociation - frequent psychological reaction to trauma- can significantly alter political choices. In political decision-making, this dissociative response may manifest as a disconnection from the implications of their choices, leading to a reliance on emotional rather than rational processes. Such cognitive distortions can profoundly shape the political landscape, as leaders and constituents alike grapple with the aftermath of trauma.² Understanding the interconnectedness of trauma and dissociation and the impacts of them are crucial in eluci-

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dating their roles in shaping political outcomes and the complexities inherent in governance.^{3,4}

Traumatic and dissociative individuals may possess several psychological and social factors that influence their tendency to support politicians. Due to the traumas they have experienced in the past and the defense mechanisms they have developed as a result, these individuals may approach political events and respond in unique ways:⁵

1. Search for Security: Individuals who have experienced trauma may seek safety and stable support to cope with the challenges they have faced. The promises made by politicians or the image of a strong leader may give them a sense of security, making them more inclined to support such politicians.⁶

2. Identity and Belonging: Post-trauma, individuals' sense of identity and belonging can become highly significant. Those with traumatic experiences may seek groups or movements where they feel safer. This may manifest in supporting a specific political viewpoint or leader around which they can unite.⁷

3. Distorted Perception: Severe traumatic incidents can affect individuals' perception of reality and so, they may assess the current political situation in a distorted manner, which can lead to supporting certain politicians.

4. Emotional Responses: Trauma can heighten emotional responses, increasing reactivity to political events. Emotionally charged leaders or rhetoric may then become especially attractive to trauma survivors. This susceptibility can manifest as fervent support for figures promising stability and order, even if their methods are authoritarian or divisive. The appeal lies in the perceived safety offered by a strong leader who claims to have all the answers, a stark contrast to the chaos and unpredictability often associated with traumatic experiences. Conversely, trauma survivors may also gravitate towards radical movements advocating for systemic change, driven by a desire to dismantle the structures they believe contributed to their suffering or the suffering of others.

5. Manipulation and Exploitation: Individuals who have undergone trauma may be more susceptible to emotional abuse and manipulation. Certain politicians may exploit this vulnerability by using populism or emotional rhetoric to gain support. These political figures may take advantage of individuals' emotional weaknesses to direct them toward their own interests.⁸

CONCEPTUALIZING TRAUMA AND DISSOCIATION

Traumatic situations, understood as experiences of intimidation, maltreatment, interpersonal violence or experiences

of exposure to a situation of substantial and overwhelming stress, are common human experiences, and are woven in our global history and, at the same time, deeply marked by more personal histories. The human impact of traumatic stress situations generates responses that can be very different depending on the moment and the situation of occurrence, the age of the person, whether or not they have been in a distressing situation before, among others.⁹ Emerging from abusive or overly indulgent parenting, political trauma, ongoing oppression, and social polarization, "dissociative anxiety" and "dissociative narcissism" give rise to a "dissociative obsession" in individuals who are manipulated or controlled.^{3,4} Many of these individuals, who target prominent figures or professionals, face issues such as sexual confusion, sexual dysfunctions, body dysmorphic disorders, dissociative depression, dissociative narcissism, and dissociative anxiety, while simultaneously idolizing their dominant leaders. Dissociative narcissism is characterized by a fragmented and inconsistent self-perception, often leading to a strong dependence on powerful figures. Autocratic leaders, by promising absolute authority and order, fill the internal void of these individuals, offering them a false sense of security and belonging. As a result, individuals with dissociative narcissism idealize their leaders, showing unconditional loyalty and reacting defensively or aggressively to criticism. The manipulative rhetoric of autocratic leaders distorts reality, making independent thinking more difficult while increasing emotional and psychological dependence. Ultimately, this mutual interaction between dissociative narcissism and autocratic leadership weakens critical thinking skills and deepens societal polarization.¹⁰

The negative impact of trauma on cognitive and emotional functions can shape individuals' responses to crises, influencing political decision-making processes. Dissociative symptoms, which cause individuals to detach from both the external world and their inner experiences, can increase susceptibility to authoritarian leaders and radical ideologies. Öztürk defined the dissociative processing style as a learned strategy that individuals adopt to cope with perceived or actual threats, which may, in turn, reinforce the need for authority during periods of political uncertainty and crisis.¹¹ Over time, trauma-induced dissociative processes can become persistent, weakening individuals' ability to engage in rational evaluation and making them more susceptible to manipulative political rhetoric. This dynamic has the potential to deepen societal polarization and strengthen unquestioning loyalty to political leaders, ultimately undermining democratic processes.¹²

In political psychology, the defense mechanisms of repression and dissociation can influence political decision-

making in similar ways. Just as individuals may compartmentalize traumatic memories to protect themselves, they may also suppress or disconnect from political realities that are emotionally distressing. This isolation can impair their ability to engage critically with political issues, making them more vulnerable to manipulation by political leaders or ideologies that promise stability. When individuals struggle with fragmented identities, it can lead to polarized political views and irrational decision-making, as they may seek certainty and security in simplistic or authoritarian solutions.⁴ This can complicate their sense of self in the political landscape, further hindering their capacity to make informed and rational decisions. Ultimately, unresolved emotional trauma can impact an individual's political behavior and decision-making process, similar to how it affects personal relationships and overall well-being.¹³

THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA AND DISSOCIATION ON PERCEPTION, COGNITION AND DECISION-MAKING

Trauma and dissociation significantly hinder cognitive functioning and perceptual clarity, which are crucial for effective decision-making.¹⁴ The process of decision-making relies heavily on cognitive functions such as memory, reasoning, and the assessment of past experiences. Trauma can interrupt these cognitive processes, causing lapses in memory or difficulty recalling important details and heightened emotional responses, which may cloud judgment and skew perceptions. Trauma can manifest as an overwhelming feeling of anxiety or fear, impacting one's ability to weigh the pros and cons of various options. This emotional dysregulation can distort the perception of risks and benefits, leading to decisions based on instinctive reactions rather than thoughtful analysis.¹⁵ Additionally, dissociation also can create a sense of disconnection from oneself and the surrounding environment, making it challenging to make informed choices.¹⁶ When individuals experience dissociation, they may detach from the reality of a situation, resulting in impaired concentration and difficulty engaging in rational thought. Dissociation disrupts the decision-making process by impairing concentration, emotional regulation, and logical reasoning. It leads individuals to rely on reactive rather than deliberate choices, often causing delays or avoidance in decision-making. In high-stress situations, dissociation weakens the ability to assess risks and predict outcomes, impacting both personal and political decisions. Ultimately, it undermines rational evaluation, resulting in choices that may not align with an individual's best interests or broader societal needs.^{17,18}

THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA AND DISSOCIATION ON EMOTIONAL REGULATION

Trauma can have significant implications for emotional regulation, often manifesting in complex and challenging ways. One prominent aspect that emerges from traumatic experiences is dissociation, which can severely impair an individual's ability to process emotions and make sound decisions.¹⁷ The dissociative symptoms resulting from trauma can lead to a fragmented sense of self and a disconnection from one's feelings, making it difficult to react to emotional situations in a constructive manner. This disconnection often hampers effective emotional regulation, as individuals may struggle to identify, express, or manage their feelings appropriately.¹⁸ Consequently, this can culminate in various mental health issues, further complicating decision-making processes and overall functionality in daily life. The interplay between trauma, dissociation, emotional regulation, and decision-making represents a critical area of concern for those impacted, as it influences their ability to navigate challenges effectively.²

INTERSECTION OF TRAUMA, DISSOCIATION, AND POLITICAL DECISION-MAKING

Psychological factors play a crucial and profound role in shaping political decision-making processes. A significant aspect of this influence is how deeply personal emotions affect voters, leading them to make decisions that are often driven more by their feelings than by logical reasoning.¹⁷ This emotional influence can result in choices that do not necessarily align with rational analysis or empirical evidence. Furthermore, the intricate relationship between experiences of trauma and states of dissociation can have a considerable impact on political preferences and decisions at various levels of government, from local administrations to national leadership.¹⁹ When leaders grapple with deeply ingrained personal issues or unresolved emotional struggles, these internal conflicts can manifest in their policy-making processes and influence their choices. As a result, the policies they advocate often reflect their psychological challenges and can be shaped by their personal histories and emotional states. For instance, a leader's unresolved traumas might not only influence their approach to managing conflicts but also affect how they interact with community issues and engage with the constituents they serve. This can lead to decisions that are less about addressing the public's needs and more about addressing their own psychological experiences and dispositions.^{4,20} Such dynamics illustrate the complex interplay between personal psychology and public policy, emphasizing the impor-

tance of understanding the emotional undercurrents that drive political decision-making.

THE ROLE OF TRAUMA ON POLITICAL DECISION MAKING

Trauma significantly influences political psychology by shaping individuals' decision-making, increasing susceptibility to authoritarianism and radicalization, and affecting cognitive functions, making them more prone to fear-based and emotionally driven political choices.²¹ Öztürk argues that individual traumas often evolve into social traumas, affecting how societies react to political crises.²² When populations face uncertainty due to economic collapse, wars, or pandemics, they tend to gravitate toward authoritarian leaders who offer stability and security. This aligns with theories in political psychology suggesting that fear and anxiety lead individuals to favor strong, dominant figures over democratic processes.²³ Similarly, research on mass psychology highlights that traumatic experiences foster increased nationalism and polarization, making societies more vulnerable to autocratic tendencies.²⁴

Historical and contemporary examples support this argument. After World War I, Germany faced economic and national humiliation, fueling widespread distress that facilitated Adolf Hitler's rise to power.²⁵ More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic led to heightened anxiety worldwide, prompting governments to implement authoritarian measures in response to public demand for safety.²⁶ Besides, according to dissonant psychohistory, prolonged psychosociopolitical oppression and harsh child-rearing practices lead to collective trauma and accumulated mass grief, which in turn contribute to societal dissociation. This dissociation manifests in two extreme and pathological social divisions: one that is excessively liberal and another that is overly submissive and obedient.²²

It is also stated that individuals who are exposed to chronic traumas due to negative child-rearing styles establish insecure attachment with their caregivers.²² Insecure attachment, the most extreme form of which is "attachment to the abuser", is associated with parental abuse in childhood.²⁷ Systematic psychological trauma causes the victim to lose their autonomy by destroying their sense of self.²⁸ In this context, it is known that abuser-attached individuals are more prone to be ruled by dominant leaders and undergo a process of revictimization. In addition, children internalize the aggression (shift in locus of control) of their parents who do this to them as an effort to control the uncompassionate and bullying attitudes they are exposed to and become attached to the abuser.²⁹ It is argued that this situation directly or indirectly contributes to the emergence of wars and ter-

rorism.³⁰ In contrast, it is emphasized that children who can experience secure attachment with their parents will have higher empathy and sensitivity and thus the frequency of individual and social violence will decrease.³¹

Since political decision-making has consequences for many others, it is alarming to think that politicians in major decision-making roles could suffer from impairments caused by brutal childhood experiences.^{32,33} It is noteworthy that trauma victim individuals adopt the worldviews of their bullying and abusive parents, and as a result, managers and political leaders share and defend the merciless and ruthless ideas with the masses.^{34,35} It is seen that people who are traumatized because of negative parenting styles applied gradually normalize this situation and also traumatize others by also engaging in bullying because of their own psychopathology, leading to the transmission of trauma from generation to generation. In this context, it is understood that traumatic individuals traumatize.³⁶ That's why, administrators and political leaders share and defend their ruthless and merciless ideas with the masses.

Moreover, Akcan and Türkmen supported that trauma victims cause wars with the effect of the brutal attitudes they adopt and thus pass on their own brutal trauma from generation to generation.³⁷ Öztürk argues that wars, genocides, and systemic oppression are deeply rooted in inter-generational trauma transmission, manifesting through mass dissociative reactions.³⁸ According to Öztürk, wars and genocides are the psychological echoes of stolen childhoods, where past trauma continues to shape violent adult behaviors. He describes dissociative revolutions as a necessary step for societies to break free from oppressive leaders and systems, thereby fostering psychosocial consciousness alliances that promote collective healing.³⁹

THE ROLE OF DISSOCIATION IN POLITICAL DECISION MAKING

Öztürk and Erdoğan mentioned that the societies with dysfunctional child-rearing practices are more prone to producing individuals who submit to authoritarian figures.² It is known that dissociation is not only an individual phenomenon but also a societal one. According to the dissonant analysis theory and modern psychotraumatology principles, societal dissociation is an adaptive reaction developed by individuals and communities in response to traumatic experiences, psychosocial oppression, and cultural conflicts. Societal dissociation is characterized by a collective dissociative response to trauma within a community.⁴⁰ It particularly emerges following cultural traumas and often aligns with the phenomena of "attachment to the aggressor" and "identification with the aggressor."

Collective dissociation, shaped by dysfunctional parenting, social oppression, and unresolved trauma, has significant implications for political decision-making.^{3,41} When individuals experience societal fragmentation and alienation, they may seek security in rigid ideologies and authoritative leadership, prioritizing order over democratic values.⁴² The Psychosocial Consciousness Alliance Theory, which posits that consciousness operates within a system shaped by trauma and memory fragmentation, suggests that unresolved collective trauma can drive polarized political behaviors. This can manifest in mass movements where individuals align with populist or extremist ideologies as a means of coping with psychological disconnection, ultimately influencing electoral outcomes, policy preferences, and governance structures.³

Similarly, the phenomenon of dissociation itself represents a cognitive impairment that negatively impacts various functions, including the organization of thoughts and the memory operations related to mental representations, irrespective of the specific content involved.⁴³ It was supported that individuals use dissociative defenses because of denial trauma, which was described as suppressing traumatic experiences, distancing oneself from reality.⁴ That's why, individuals perceive their lives as divided into "before" and "after" the trauma that was named as trauma dichotomy. The concept of dissociative denial, which manifests as a process of "dissociative oscillation," ultimately evolves into denial trauma.³⁶

Denialism is the construction of a collective worldview and reality that supports "distorted or warped states" arising from the denial or dissociation of facts that disrupt functionality and impede the norms of actual life.⁴⁴ Denialism has certain negative consequences in terms of public policies and strategies. Individuals with low self-esteem and inadequacy experience a state of consciousness that denies these aspects of themselves, establishing an illusory ambivalent relationship with a dominant leader, which leads them to both hesitate towards and believe they love that leader, while also falling under their control.³⁹ Because these low self-esteem and inadequate individuals live under a narcissistic psychopathic siege, they can only experience a sense of attachment to the society from which they are alienated through an imagined bond with a dominant leader who, like themselves, hates them and their people.⁴⁵

In individuals and societies that deny their traumas, not only is the grieving process delayed, but the psychological pain that cannot be neutralized turns into anger and violence, and even a "hunger for control" emerges. The hunger for control causes individuals and societies to exert pressure on each

other, democracy to regress or evolve into fascism, and even dictatorship and tyranny to dominate bilateral relations, business life, and social communication mechanisms.⁴⁶ The more individuals and societies governed by oppressive systems move away from psychosocial integration under the influence of revictimization experiences, the more they hate normal people and communities. In traumatized communities or societies, individuals want to satisfy their pervasive hatred by controlling and ruling other people, but they bless their dictators to whom they "voluntarily" surrender their freedom.¹⁰

The dissociative process fosters the creation of an alternative digital identity, distancing individuals from real-world political and social engagement.³⁸ According to dissonant cyber psychology, digital communication networks and social media platforms function as "hypnotic psychosocial fusion" agents, enabling oppressive systems and dictators to manipulate mass consciousness.⁴⁵ In this era of digital oppression and control, individuals experiencing cyber dissociation and hypnotic societal fusion—triggered by cyber traumas, cyber gangs, and digital stimulus pollution—seek to construct multiple realities.⁴⁶ They develop cyber alter personalities, psychodigital selves, and similar constructs as a defense against media manipulation and oppressive systems.⁴⁰ As cyber dissociative experiences intensify, these fragmented identities contribute to the transformation of traditional societal structures into a dissociative cyber society, where individuals develop multiple memories, consciousnesses, and personalities in an adaptive yet fractured manner.⁴⁷

Furthermore, authoritarian leaders exploit societal trauma and fear to solidify their control, portraying themselves as saviors to vulnerable and fearful populations.¹⁰ By leveraging "hypnotic psychosocial fusion", they dissociate and indoctrinate traumatized individuals and societies through systematic repression, polarization, and propaganda. These tactics weaken critical thinking and independent decision-making, fostering blind loyalty to rigid political ideologies and authoritarian rule. As a result, entire populations become more susceptible to manipulation, often supporting oppressive regimes under the illusion of stability and security. This process not only consolidates power for dictators but also fuels large-scale conflicts, including wars and genocides, as leaders capitalize on mass dissociation to justify violence. Öztürk describes this as the "domino effect of traumatic experiences", where unresolved collective trauma perpetuates cycles of violence, social fragmentation, and political control.⁴⁷ Over time, this dynamic erodes democratic values, deepens societal divisions, and sustains oppressive systems, preventing societies from breaking free from cycles of authoritarianism and conflict.

CONCLUSION

According to the “Dissoanalysis Theory”, developed by Öztürk as a modern psychotraumatology approach, traumatic experiences like chronic oppression, childhood trauma, and authoritarian control dissociate individuals and societies, making them more susceptible to oppressive systems.³ This situation was named as psychocommunal dissociation that leads to mass obedience and conformism.³⁸ It is known that traumatic experiences and dissociative states weaken individuals’ connection to reality and can also significantly impair decision-making abilities and lead to the development of defense mechanisms.⁴⁸ In such cases, they tend to rely on emotional and intuitive evaluations when making political decisions. The need to feel secure may lead them to support policies that enhance safety and gravitate toward certain parties or leaders with impulsive reactions.⁴⁹

Additionally, traumatic experiences influence individuals’ relationships with society. Those seeking a sense of belonging may adopt policies that are sensitive to social issues. Through trauma activism, the desire to make sense of their experiences and take action for social change becomes prominent.⁵⁰ For instance, those with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) may gravitate toward security-focused policies due to feelings of loss of control. Psychosocial intervention approaches, including trauma-sensitive education and early childhood mental health initiatives, can help curb the development of dissociative obedience and foster more resilient communities.²¹

Another factor influencing this situation is the way information shared through media and social media is perceived. Individuals who have experienced trauma may develop a deeper connection with the stories of people who have had similar experiences, which can increase their sensitivity toward politics. Social media, as a powerful platform, allows individuals to share their traumas and engage in social movements, creating a source of motivation for societal change.⁵¹ The social mechanisms through which individuals express their traumas create a foundation for those with

similar experiences to come together and build solidarity. This type of solidarity not only strengthens interpersonal bonds but also enhances political mobilization. Thus, traumas are not merely individual experiences; they can transform into a form of collective consciousness and struggle.⁵² However, the integration of individuals within the mass can be disrupted by the mainstream media, which produces content of a manipulative nature as if it were the general acceptance of the public through a “public opinion poll” that publishes misleading results disconnected from reality. People may either choose to believe that these viewpoints represent their own attitudes or ignore the ideas disseminated by the mass media. In either case, the individual may be involuntarily included by mass institutions in a collective process in which they are essentially ignored or dissociated.⁵³

In conclusion, dissoanalytic theory, which explores how dissociation shapes individual and collective consciousness, provides a crucial framework for understanding the intersection of trauma and political preferences.¹¹ According to this theory, individuals who have experienced trauma and dissociation may develop fragmented identities and altered perceptions of reality, influencing their political beliefs and behaviors.⁵⁴ The dissociative process can lead to an increased susceptibility to authoritarian leadership, as individuals seek security and order to counteract internal chaos. Moreover, unresolved trauma can create a cycle of projection, where past psychological wounds shape political engagement, reinforcing fear-based ideologies and potentially perpetuating cycles of oppression and violence. Nietzsche’s assertion that “when you look into the abyss, the abyss also looks into you” resonates with the dissoanalytic understanding that trauma can transform victims into aggressors, illustrating the psychological mechanisms that drive individuals toward extremist ideologies, radicalization, or compliance with oppressive regimes.⁵⁵ In this way, dissoanalytic theory highlights the dangers of collective dissociation in political contexts, emphasizing the need for trauma-informed interventions to prevent cycles of violence and dehumanization in society.^{3,4}

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