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Hypothesis

Trauma and Symbolic Objectification: A Representational Mechanism for Defensive Capture and Persistent Re-Experiencing

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Abstract

Traumatic exposure does not uniformly lead to persistent posttraumatic symptoms, suggesting that vulnerability depends on more than event intensity alone. The Symbolic Objectification Hypothesis (SOH) proposes that an important determinant of traumatic outcome is the representational form in which threat is processed during activation. Specifically, risk increases when threat cannot be maintained as a bounded, identifiable, and cognitively manipulable object while executive continuity remains intact. Under these conditions, threat is more likely to become immersive, increasing the probability of defensive capture. SOH integrates findings showing that threat activation is graded and can coexist with organized cognition, and it proposes a mechanism linking representational failure to persistent re-experiencing. When symbolic objectification breaks down during encoding or reactivation, attentional narrowing increases, sequential processing becomes less stable, and temporal and contextual integration are weakened. Subsequent retrieval may therefore be more likely to evoke a present-oriented reliving state rather than an autobiographically situated memory. The hypothesis is operationalized through repeated indicators of symbolic objectification maintenance and restoration during activation, together with performance-based markers of discontinuity and recovery that index defensive capture. SOH generates falsifiable predictions regarding trauma vulnerability, symptom persistence, and treatment response. Clinically, the model suggests that trauma-focused interventions may be strengthened by pairing exposure-based engagement with explicit training in symbolic objectification, with the goal of reducing immersive threat experience while preserving executive continuity.

Keywords: posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD); flashbacks; intrusive memories; trauma memory; contextual integration; hippocampus; executive continuity; emotion regulation; dissociation; representational format; symbolic objectification; defensive capture

1. Why Severity and Arousal Are Not Enough

A central problem in traumatic stress research is explaining variability in outcome. Individuals exposed to comparable threatening events often show markedly different trajectories: some develop persistent intrusion, hyperarousal, avoidance, and re-experiencing, whereas others recover with limited long-term impairment. Although event severity contributes to risk, it does not fully explain this divergence.

Two observations are especially important. First, acute distress after threatening events is common and often transient. A theory of traumatic persistence must therefore explain why, in some cases, threat-related memories remain insufficiently integrated and later return with a strong sense of presentness and reduced contextual integration (Brewin et al., 1996). Second, heightened arousal is not inherently disorganizing. Individuals may show substantial physiological mobilization while remaining oriented, coherent, and capable of organized action, consistent with models of threat response as graded rather than all-or-none (Phelps & LeDoux, 2005; Etkin et al., 2011). Together, these

observations suggest that vulnerability depends not only on the intensity of arousal, but also on whether cognitive organization is maintained while threat is activated.

The Symbolic Objectification Hypothesis (SOH) proposes that a key vulnerability lies in the capacity to represent threat in symbolic object form during periods of activation. In ordinary cognition, people routinely transform events, persons, and situations into bounded mental representations that can be labeled, held in mind, sequenced, and cognitively manipulated while executive continuity remains intact. SOH treats this capacity as an adaptive condition that allows threatening material to be processed without becoming fully immersive or behaviorally dominant.

From this perspective, perceived agency is especially important. Threat tends to intensify when a stimulus is experienced as active, intentional, and imminent, and to diminish when it can be represented as a bounded and inspectable object of cognition. SOH formalizes this contrast as agency inflation versus symbolic objectification. In agency inflation, threat is encoded as an acting presence, thereby increasing immersive action readiness. In symbolic objectification, threat is held as a delimited event or memory that can be named, contextualized, and sequenced, thereby preserving executive continuity.

When symbolic objectification is maintained, arousal may increase without displacing executive organization. When it fails, however, threat is more likely to be processed as an immediate field of action rather than as a bounded representation. This shift increases the likelihood that survival-oriented processing will dominate cognition, with downstream effects on working memory, sequencing, temporal organization, and contextual integration. These disruptions are consistent with existing models that identify impaired integration and contextualization as central to persistent re-experiencing and intrusion (Brewin et al., 1996; Ehlers et al., 2012). The consequence is not simply a strong emotional memory, but a memory that is more likely to reactivate as an ongoing experience rather than as a past event.

The present framework shifts emphasis from arousal magnitude alone to the stability of representational format under activation. The incremental claim of SOH is that symbolic objectification during threat activation may function as a proximal gating condition that helps explain when contextual integration, appraisal-based updating, and therapeutic processing remain available or become disrupted. In this way, the model is intended to complement existing trauma theories by specifying a proximal condition under which contextualization and therapeutic updating succeed or fail.

2. SOH in Simplest Form: Symbolic Objectification as a State-Dependent Gate

2.1. Core Claim

The Symbolic Objectification Hypothesis (SOH) proposes that the capacity to represent threat in symbolic object form functions as a gate between processing states. When threat is maintained as a bounded object of cognition—something that can be identified, labeled, contained, and sequenced—mobilization may increase while remaining compatible with executive continuity. When symbolic objectification fails, however, threat is no longer primarily represented as an object of cognition and instead becomes immersive and agentially intensified. Under these conditions, the probability increases that processing will shift into a defensive state in which survival-oriented control becomes dominant and executive continuity becomes less reliable.

SOH does not claim that symbolic objectification eliminates or substantially reduces emotional arousal. High levels of mobilization may coexist with intact organization. The claim is narrower: representational format helps determine whether activation remains compatible with the cognitive conditions required for integration. In this sense, symbolic objectification is proposed as a mechanism that constrains whether threat can be processed while sequencing, contextual integration, and executive continuity remain sufficiently stable for adaptive updating to occur.

The model also distinguishes the proposed gate from its downstream phenomenology. Individuals often describe traumatic reactivation in present-oriented terms, such as feeling that the

event is happening again or that they are back in it. In SOH, these experiences are treated as consequences of failed symbolic objectification and subsequent defensive capture, rather than as the primary mechanism itself.

2.2. Proposed Causal Chain: Symbolic Objectification Failure, Defensive Capture, and Persistent Re-Experiencing

SOH proposes that failures of symbolic objectification increase the likelihood of defensive capture, which in turn disrupts executive continuity and contextual integration during encoding or reactivation, thereby increasing the likelihood of later present-oriented re-experiencing. Once this occurs, cognitive continuity becomes less stable, with disruptions in sequencing, temporal organization, and contextual integration. The resulting memory trace is then more likely, upon later reactivation, to reinstate an immersive action-oriented state characterized by present-oriented reliving, escalating mobilization, and a reduced opportunity for corrective updating.

This framework yields a specific empirical prediction: later intrusive, present-oriented re-experiencing should be better predicted not by peak arousal alone, but by the combination of symbolic objectification failure and defensive capture during encoding or later reactivation.

2.3. Two Points of Entry: Encoding and Reactivation

SOH proposes two nonexclusive routes by which traumatic persistence may develop.

The first route is **defensive capture during encoding**. During the event itself, or in its immediate aftermath, symbolic objectification may fail, executive continuity may become compromised, and contextual integration may weaken. Under these conditions, the resulting memory trace may be insufficiently integrated and more likely to support later immersive reactivation.

The second route is **defensive capture during reactivation**. Even when the original event has been encoded with partial integration, later cue-driven engagement with the memory may repeatedly disrupt symbolic objectification and trigger defensive capture. Repeated failures of this kind may reduce the likelihood of successful updating and maintain retrieval in a state-dependent, immersive form.

Accordingly, SOH is not limited to the initial traumatic event. The model predicts that the same representational gating problem may recur whenever the memory is reactivated, and that persistence may be maintained not only by how the event was first encoded, but also by how it is repeatedly engaged over time.

3. Core Constructs and Boundaries

SOH depends on clear and noncircular definitions. Its central claim is that traumatic persistence is shaped in part by a representational gate: whether threat is processed in symbolic object form or in an immersive, agentically intensified form. This distinction is proposed to influence whether mobilization remains compatible with executive continuity or shifts toward defensive capture.

3.1. Symbolic Objectification: Definition and Scope

In SOH, *symbolic objectification* (SO) refers to an operating state in which threat is represented as a bounded object of cognition that can be identified, labeled, contained, and mentally manipulated while executive continuity remains intact. Executive continuity refers to preserved orientation and the ability to sustain an ongoing working thread without blanks, step-loss, or momentary collapse in cognitive tracking.

In this model, executive continuity is a necessary condition for identifying SO. A representation counts as SO only if it remains usable by executive control during activation.

SO is therefore not equivalent to low emotional intensity, calmness, or polished verbal narration. Mobilization may remain high while SO is intact. What defines SO is the combination of bounded

representational format and preserved continuity under activation (Phelps & LeDoux, 2005; Etkin et al., 2011).

SOH distinguishes between two related constructs. The first is **SO state**, defined as the momentary degree to which threat is maintained in symbolic object form with preserved continuity during active engagement. The second is **SO maintenance/restoration capacity**, defined as the ability, whether spontaneous or instructed, to sustain or re-establish symbolic objectification as activation increases. This distinction matters because vulnerability may depend not only on whether SO is present at a given moment, but also on whether it can be restored once destabilized.

The term *objectification* is used here in a strictly representational sense. It refers to the transformation of threat into a bounded and inspectable object of cognition and does not carry an interpersonal or moral meaning.

3.2. Immersion and Defensive Capture

When SO fails, threat is hypothesized to shift toward an immersive form of processing. In this state, the stimulus is no longer primarily represented as a bounded object of cognition, but as an immediate field of experience demanding response. Threat is experienced less as something being thought about and more as something unfolding in real time.

SOH proposes that this immersive shift increases the likelihood of **defensive capture**, defined as a transition in which survival-oriented control becomes dominant and executive continuity becomes unreliable. This formulation is consistent with work suggesting that prefrontal-limbic regulation reflects dynamic coupling rather than simple one-directional inhibition, and that threat-related mobilization may remain organized until a transition in control occurs (Etkin et al., 2011; Kim et al., 2011; Urry et al., 2006).

3.3. Executive Continuity and Contextual Integration as Downstream Processes

SOH treats executive continuity and contextual integration as downstream processes rather than as the representational gate itself. Executive continuity refers to the ability to maintain a working thread during activation, including sequencing, step tracking, and short-horizon working memory. Contextual integration refers to the features that allow a memory to be retrieved as a past event rather than as an ongoing occurrence, including temporal order, contextual detail, source discrimination, and coherent autobiographical placement.

These functions are central to established accounts of intrusive and present-oriented traumatic remembering, including dual representation and contextualization models (Brewin et al., 1996), and are directly relevant to experimental work aimed at reducing unwanted trauma memories through postevent processing manipulations (Ehlers et al., 2012; Varma et al., 2024).

The specific claim of SOH is that failure of SO, especially when followed by defensive capture, makes these integrative functions less reliable during encoding and/or reactivation. The resulting memory trace is therefore more likely to support retrieval that is experienced as re-entry into the event rather than recollection of it.

3.4. Symbolic Objectification Is Not Dissociation

A key boundary condition of SOH is that symbolic objectification must be distinguished from dissociation. Although both may be described subjectively as forms of distance from experience, they are proposed to have different implications for integration.

3.4.1. Core Distinction

In SOH, symbolic objectification is an adaptive state in which threat is maintained as a bounded object of cognition while executive continuity is preserved. The person remains oriented and able to sustain coherent engagement with the material.

By contrast, shutdown dissociation is characterized by detachment accompanied by breakdown in executive continuity. Subjective experiences such as unreality, numbness, or distance may be present, but the defining feature in SOH is that this detachment co-occurs with thread loss, blanks, impaired sequencing, or reduced capacity to maintain coherent contact with the material in real time.

3.4.2. Why This Distinction Matters

Because dissociation may feel like distance, self-reported distance alone is not sufficient to identify symbolic objectification. Without evidence of preserved continuity, reports of feeling detached or far away may reflect shutdown rather than adaptive regulation. For this reason, SOH treats executive continuity as a validity condition for identifying SO. A report of distance qualifies as symbolic objectification only when orientation and thread integrity remain intact.

3.4.3. Operational Classification During Engagement

To avoid circularity, SOH applies a prespecified classification rule during threat or memory engagement. **SO is present** when object-mode indicators are elevated and executive continuity is intact. **Immersive action mode** is present when object-mode indicators decrease and agency or imminence indicators increase while continuity remains at least partly preserved. **Shutdown dissociation** is present when detachment or unreality indicators increase while continuity declines, including blanks, thread loss, or step-loss, regardless of whether subjective distance is reported.

This distinction is intended to prevent symbolic objectification from being reduced either to a subjective feeling of distance or to the phenomenology of re-experiencing itself. In SOH, symbolic objectification is a functional state defined by representational form and preserved continuity, whereas shutdown dissociation is a state that undermines the continuity required for sequencing and contextual integration.

3.4.4. Clinical Implication

This distinction has direct clinical implications. SOH predicts that the goal of trauma-focused work is not detachment per se, but sustained contact with traumatic material in symbolic object form while continuity is preserved. If a client appears calmer because shutdown dissociation has emerged, integration is expected to be less likely in that state. The immediate task is therefore to restore orientation and continuity before deeper processing proceeds.

3.5. Symbolic Objectification Is Not Equivalent to Strategy Labels

SOH also distinguishes symbolic objectification from commonly used regulatory strategy labels such as reappraisal, self-distancing, and decentering. These strategies may recruit prefrontal systems and reduce distress in some contexts (Ochsner et al., 2002, 2004; Koenigsberg et al., 2010; Ayduk & Kross, 2008; Kross & Ayduk, 2011), and they may sometimes facilitate symbolic objectification. However, SOH does not equate any of these strategies with SO itself.

The distinction matters because strategy is not the same as achieved state. A person may attempt reappraisal without successfully maintaining SO under activation. Conversely, symbolic objectification may occur without any explicit strategy being used. For SOH, the primary construct is the achieved representational state during activation.

Accordingly, the model proposes that clinical outcome depends less on which strategy is nominally employed and more on whether SO is actually maintained or restored while the memory or threat cue is active. This determines whether defensive capture occurs and whether updating remains possible (Gross, 2015; Ehlers et al., 2012).

4. Operationalization: Measuring Symbolic Objectification and Defensive Capture Without Circularity

The value of SOH depends on whether its central constructs can be measured independently of the outcomes they are intended to predict. The primary methodological challenge is to operationalize **SO** as a representational state under activation without redefining it in terms of good memory, reduced symptoms, or narrative coherence. To avoid circularity, SOH distinguishes among three domains: (a) **SO state and SO maintenance/restoration capacity** during standardized trauma-related engagement; (b) **defensive capture**, measured as discontinuity and recovery during engagement; and (c) **present-oriented reliving and related intrusion qualities**, assessed outside the engagement context as ecological outcomes (Brewin et al., 1996; Ehlers et al., 2012; Varma et al., 2024).

4.1. Avoiding Circularity: SO State, Executive Continuity, Dissociation, and Present-Oriented Reliving

Because the constructs in SOH are phenomenologically adjacent, they must be separated in advance at both the conceptual and measurement levels. In particular, symbolic objectification, dissociation, immersion, and present-oriented reliving should not be allowed to collapse into one another by definition or shared method.

4.1.1. What Symbolic Objectification Is, and Is Not

SO is defined as an in-the-moment operating state in which threat is represented as a bounded object of cognition that can be labeled, contained, and mentally manipulated while executive continuity remains intact. It is not defined by low arousal, low distress, coherent narration, or reduced intrusion frequency. High mobilization may be present while SO is intact. What distinguishes SO is the combination of representational format and preserved continuity under activation (Phelps & LeDoux, 2005; Etkin et al., 2011).

4.1.2. Three Separations That Prevent Circularity

To avoid circularity, SOH separates three domains that are often conflated.

The first is **SO state**, which refers to representational format during standardized engagement. It is assessed through indicators of object-mode processing, such as boundedness, labelability, and manipulability, and is interpreted as SO only when continuity remains intact.

The second is **executive continuity**, assessed concurrently as a functional condition. Continuity is not itself the representational component of SO, nor is it an ecological symptom outcome. Rather, it is the condition required to interpret object-mode reports as evidence of SO rather than shutdown, detachment, or transient cognitive failure.

The third is **present-oriented reliving**, treated as an ecological outcome and assessed outside the engagement period, for example through diary or ecological momentary assessment. These measures capture the degree to which intrusions are experienced as current, perceptually dominant, or action-relevant, without making those features part of the definition of SO (Brewin et al., 1996; Ehlers et al., 2012; Varma et al., 2024).

This structure is intended to ensure that SO is not simply a renamed absence of intrusion and is not defined by the downstream outcomes it is hypothesized to influence.

4.1.3. Classification Rule During Engagement

During cue or memory engagement, SOH applies a prespecified classification rule. **SO is present** when object-mode indicators are elevated and executive continuity remains intact. **Immersive action mode** is present when object-mode indicators decline and/or immersion indicators increase while continuity remains at least partly preserved. **Shutdown dissociation** is present when detachment or unreality indicators rise while continuity drops, including thread loss, blanks, or step-loss, regardless of whether the person reports feeling distant from the material.

This rule is important because subjective distance alone is ambiguous. Feelings of distance or detachment do not qualify as symbolic objectification unless continuity is preserved.

4.1.4. Why Intrusion Phenomenology Is Measured but Does Not Define SO

SOH treats the phenomenology of intrusion as relevant but downstream. Present-oriented reliving may function as a correlate of immersion during standardized engagement and as an ecological outcome in everyday life, but it does not define SO. This avoids the circular formulation in which SO would be defined as the absence of reliving and then used to predict less reliving. In SOH, symbolic objectification is defined by representational format under conditions of preserved continuity, whereas intrusion phenomenology is treated as a consequence of immersion and defensive capture (Brewin et al., 1996; Ehlers et al., 2012).

4.1.5. Implications for Measurement Design

To reduce shared-method inflation, SO-format items should assess properties of representation rather than the immediacy of threat. Items should focus on boundedness, labelability, and manipulability rather than wording such as whether the material feels current. Executive continuity should be assessed through brief repeated checks of thread integrity and, where feasible, short micro-probes sensitive to within-person drops relative to immediate baseline. Present-oriented reliving should be measured separately, ideally in real time during spontaneous intrusions, using language distinct from SO-format items (Ehlers et al., 2012; Varma et al., 2024).

4.2. *Measuring SO State and SO Maintenance/Restoration Capacity*

SOH requires that symbolic objectification be measured independently of symptom reduction and independently of broad strategy labels such as reappraisal or self-distancing. SO is therefore operationalized as a representational state during activation, while executive continuity is measured in parallel as a validity condition.

4.2.1. SO State: Representational Indicators

SO state is indexed through brief repeated items designed to assess object-mode representation during engagement. These indicators should target how the material is represented in mind rather than how distressing it is. Core dimensions include whether the material is experienced as a bounded object of cognition, whether it remains labelable while active, and whether attention can shift across parts or sequence without loss of the overall thread.

These indicators are intended to capture representational format under activation, consistent with the claim that mobilization can increase without necessarily disrupting organization (Phelps & LeDoux, 2005; Etkin et al., 2011).

4.2.2. Executive Continuity as a Concurrent Validity Condition

Because SO is only classified when object-mode representation is accompanied by preserved continuity, continuity must be assessed in parallel. This may be done with a brief self-report item concerning maintenance of thread, a simple orientation check, or a very brief micro-probe sensitive to temporary reductions in working continuity. The critical interpretive rule is that endorsements of object-mode representation count as SO only when continuity remains intact. If continuity is degraded, the state is classified separately.

4.2.3. Screening for Shutdown Dissociation

Shutdown dissociation should also be assessed concurrently because it may mimic distance while disrupting continuity. A brief dissociation screen may include indicators of unreality, detachment, and blanking or loss of sequence. When these indicators increase in conjunction with continuity failure, the state should be classified as shutdown rather than SO.

4.2.4. SO Maintenance and Restoration Capacity

SOH also requires measurement of the ability to maintain or restore symbolic objectification under activation. This construct can be indexed through change following brief standardized prompts that target representational format directly rather than simply encouraging distress reduction. For example, participants may be instructed to hold the material as a bounded object of cognition, label what is active in words, and track its sequence while allowing emotion to remain present.

The primary index is within-episode improvement in object-mode indicators, provided this occurs without a concurrent drop in executive continuity. This allows the construct to be measured as change in representational state rather than as use of a nominal strategy, while remaining compatible with work showing that cognitive operations can recruit regulatory control systems under emotional challenge (Ochsner et al., 2002, 2004; Koenigsberg et al., 2010; Ayduk & Kross, 2008; Kross & Ayduk, 2011; Gross, 2015).

4.2.5. Optional Correlates of Immersion

SOH also allows inclusion of experiential correlates of immersion, such as feeling inside the material rather than observing it, or feeling as though the body is preparing to act as if danger were current. These variables may help map phenomenology and connect laboratory engagement states to ecological intrusion outcomes, but they do not determine whether SO is present. SO is identified by representational indicators in the context of intact continuity (Brewin et al., 1996; Ehlers et al., 2012; Varma et al., 2024).

4.3. *Measuring Defensive Capture: Discontinuity and Recovery Dynamics*

A distinctive prediction of SOH is that threat engagement may produce abrupt state transitions. **Defensive capture** is therefore operationalized as a within-person pattern of discontinuity during engagement combined with delayed recovery after cue offset.

The model anticipates at least two capture phenotypes. The first is **discontinuity-type capture**, characterized by abrupt thread loss, blanks, step-loss, sequencing breakdown, or abandonment of ongoing task demands. The second is **immersion-dominant capture without full shutdown**, in which object-mode representation collapses and action urgency narrows attention while overt task behavior remains partly intact, followed by prolonged recovery.

A recommended measurement structure includes three phases. In the **pre-cue baseline**, the participant completes a brief continuity probe and a brief SO-format probe to establish immediate within-session baseline levels. During **engagement**, repeated sampling is used to detect lapse clusters or change points, alongside brief state ratings assessing objectification, dissociation, and immersion correlates. In the **post-cue recovery window**, repeated probes continue to estimate the rate at which continuity and representational stability return toward baseline.

Primary indicators of defensive capture include abrupt within-person discontinuity relative to immediate baseline, observable continuity failure such as thread loss or sequencing collapse, a concurrent drop in object-mode indicators, and slowed return to baseline following cue offset. Recovery should be compared not only with neutral cues but also with matched cognitive-load control cues.

Physiological measures may be included as convergent markers, especially when they index recovery dynamics rather than activation magnitude alone. This is consistent with work emphasizing return to baseline as a key feature of effective regulatory control (Urry et al., 2006; Kim et al., 2011; Etkin et al., 2011; Phelps & LeDoux, 2005).

4.4. Essential Controls: Distinguishing Defensive Capture From Generic Load

Because executive performance can deteriorate under distraction, fatigue, dual-task demand, or generalized stress, SOH requires control conditions that distinguish defensive capture from ordinary cognitive load.

At minimum, studies should include a **matched-load control condition** involving comparable cognitive effort without trauma-relevant meaning, so that meaning-driven capture can be distinguished from generic task demand. Measures of **arousal and distress** should be included as covariates in order to test the specific claim that activation magnitude alone does not account for capture or downstream outcomes (Phelps & LeDoux, 2005; Etkin et al., 2011). **Concurrent dissociation measures** are also necessary to avoid misclassifying detachment or shutdown as successful symbolic objectification. Finally, investigators should account for **baseline executive capacity and short-term confounds**, including sleep disruption, intoxication, acute illness, medication changes, and where relevant, trait dissociation or related vulnerabilities (Ehlers et al., 2012).

The central discriminant prediction is that distress and arousal alone will not reliably predict later present-oriented reliving unless symbolic objectification fails and defensive capture occurs during encoding or reactivation (Brewin et al., 1996; Ehlers et al., 2012; Varma et al., 2024).

5. Mechanisms of Symbolic Objectification

The Symbolic Objectification Hypothesis (SOH) identifies a central regulatory variable in trauma processing: the capacity to represent threat as a bounded object of cognition while executive continuity remains intact. This representational format allows affective and sensory material to remain available for processing without requiring a shift into immersive action mode. In this way, symbolic objectification is hypothesized to reduce the likelihood that mobilization escalates into defensive capture (Phelps & LeDoux, 2005; Etkin et al., 2011).

5.1. Symbolic Objectification as a Change in Threat Representation

In ordinary cognition, symbolization converts experience into forms that can be held in mind, named, and sequenced. SOH proposes that this process serves a specific regulatory function under threat. Symbolic objectification does not eliminate affective salience. Rather, it transforms threat from an immersive field of experience into a bounded object of cognition. This preserves the conditions needed for sequencing, contextual integration, and updating.

When symbolic objectification fails, threat is more likely to be processed in immersive action mode. Attention narrows, immediacy increases, and executive continuity becomes more vulnerable. Under these conditions, mobilization is more likely to culminate in defensive capture, compromising contextual integration and increasing the probability that later retrieval will take the form of present-oriented reliving rather than autobiographical recall (Brewin et al., 1996; Ehlers et al., 2012).

5.2. Agency and Objectification as Opposing Representational Formats

SOH can be clarified by viewing symbolic objectification and immersive threat processing as opposing representational formats. At one pole, threat is represented as active, intentional, and imminent. At the other, it is represented as bounded, inspectable, and cognitively manageable. SOH proposes that the more threat is represented as agentic and immediate, the more likely it is to recruit action readiness and survival-oriented control. The more it can be maintained as a bounded object of cognition, the more likely it is that executive continuity will be preserved.

This formulation is descriptive rather than moral. The model does not endorse objectification in interpersonal or ethical terms; its claim is limited to the representational properties of threat processing under activation.

This distinction also helps explain why subjective reports of distance can be misleading. A person may feel removed from traumatic material because it has been symbolically objectified, but

similar language may also reflect shutdown dissociation. In SOH, only the former qualifies as adaptive distance because only the former preserves the continuity required for integration.

5.3. Symbolic Mediation: Labeling and Sequencing as Stabilizers

SOH further proposes that symbolic mediation, particularly labeling and sequencing, helps stabilize symbolic objectification. Prior work on regulation has shown that cognitive operations can recruit prefrontal systems and modulate affective responding (Ochsner et al., 2002, 2004). The narrower claim here is that labeling and sequencing matter because they help sustain object-mode representation while activation is present.

Accordingly, the key issue is not simply whether distress decreases, but whether representational stability is maintained while threat-related material remains active. If labeling and sequencing remain available, the material may stay processable without becoming immersive. If they fail, the likelihood of defensive capture increases.

5.4. Updating as Dependent on Representational Format

SOH is also compatible with predictive processing perspectives, according to which updating requires sustained access to the target representation while discrepant information can be integrated (Friston, 2010; Clark, 2013). From this perspective, successful safety updating depends not only on exposure to corrective information but also on the ability to maintain the threat representation in a form that remains cognitively available for revision.

SOH therefore proposes that updating is format-dependent. If the memory or cue remains in symbolic object form, error signals and contextual information can be integrated. If defensive capture pre-empts processing, updating is more likely to be truncated or destabilized.

5.5. Executive Continuity as the Functional Surface for Integration

Within SOH, executive continuity functions as the immediate cognitive surface on which sequencing, contextual integration, and updating occur. When continuity is preserved, integration remains possible even under substantial mobilization. When continuity collapses, whether through defensive capture or shutdown dissociation, integration becomes intermittently unavailable in the moment.

This view is consistent with models emphasizing dynamic prefrontal-limbic coupling, in which threat responding may remain graded until a shift in control occurs (Etkin et al., 2011; Urry et al., 2006; Kim et al., 2011; Phelps & LeDoux, 2005). SOH extends this literature by proposing that such transitions are shaped in part by representational format.

6. Flagship Predictions and Potential Disconfirmations

SOH is intended to be falsifiable. Its central claim is that symbolic objectification under activation helps determine whether mobilization remains compatible with executive continuity or shifts into defensive capture, thereby influencing whether later retrieval is experienced as contextualized remembering or as immersive, present-oriented re-experiencing (Brewin et al., 1996; Ehlers et al., 2012).

Prediction 1: Symbolic Objectification Will Predict Intrusion Quality Beyond Severity, Arousal, and Dissociation

SOH predicts that individual differences in symbolic objectification maintenance and restoration during early postexposure processing or standardized cue reactivation will predict later intrusion quality beyond event severity, peak arousal, and dissociation.

This prediction could be tested in prospective or analogue-trauma designs by assessing symbolic objectification state and restoration capacity, defensive capture indices, and relevant covariates such as severity, arousal, baseline executive capacity, sleep disruption, and trait or state dissociation.

Outcomes should emphasize ecological measures of intrusion quality, including present-oriented reliving, action urgency, and contextual integration, and secondarily intrusion frequency or distress (Ehlers et al., 2012; Varma et al., 2024).

Support for SOH would be shown if symbolic objectification predicts later intrusion quality after severity, arousal, dissociation, and executive vulnerability are controlled.

Prediction 2: Failures of Symbolic Objectification Will Covary With Defensive Capture and Slowed Recovery

SOH predicts that within-person decreases in symbolic objectification during cue engagement will coincide with defensive capture, indexed by abrupt discontinuity and delayed recovery after cue offset.

This prediction could be tested through repeated sampling during engagement, including object-mode indicators, executive continuity probes, and recovery slope after cue offset. Where feasible, physiological recovery may be included as a convergent marker (Urry et al., 2006; Kim et al., 2011).

Support for SOH would be shown if symbolic objectification failure is temporally coupled with discontinuity and slowed recovery beyond what can be explained by distress or arousal alone (Etkin et al., 2011; Phelps & LeDoux, 2005).

Prediction 3: Dissociation Will Not Function Like Symbolic Objectification

A central boundary claim of SOH is that shutdown dissociation is not an intensified form of symbolic objectification. Although dissociation may increase feelings of distance or unreality, it should impair continuity and contextual access rather than support them.

This prediction could be tested by assessing symbolic objectification state, executive continuity, and state dissociation concurrently during cue engagement, followed by immediate measures of contextual integration, sequence memory, and source or context detail.

Support for SOH would be shown if symbolic objectification predicts better contextual integration, whereas dissociation predicts poorer contextual integration even when both involve reports of subjective distance (Brewin et al., 1996).

Prediction 4: Treatment Effects on Re-Experiencing Will Be Mediated by Improved Symbolic Objectification and Reduced Defensive Capture

SOH predicts that in effective trauma-focused treatment, reductions in immersive re-experiencing will be mediated not only by symptom reduction in general, but specifically by improved ability to restore symbolic objectification under activation and by reduced likelihood of defensive capture during memory engagement.

This prediction could be tested longitudinally across treatment sessions by embedding brief standardized engagement segments, assessing symbolic objectification restoration capacity and capture indices, and tracking outcomes such as intrusion quality, contextual integration, avoidance, and functioning. Comparisons between standard protocols and interventions explicitly designed to strengthen symbolic objectification would be especially informative (Boterhoven de Haan et al., 2020; Ehlers et al., 2012).

Support for SOH would be shown if changes in symbolic objectification and defensive capture account for reductions in re-experiencing beyond changes in distress alone.

Prediction 5: Similar Immediate Distress Will Yield Different Outcomes Depending on Symbolic Objectification

SOH predicts that immediate distress and later intrusion quality can dissociate when symbolic objectification is experimentally manipulated. Two individuals may show similar distress during engagement, yet differ in later outcomes depending on whether symbolic objectification was achieved and defensive capture was prevented.

This prediction could be tested by randomizing participants during engagement to a symbolic objectification manipulation, such as instruction to maintain the material as a bounded object of cognition while labeling and sequencing it, versus control conditions matched for demand or designed to reduce distress without improving object-mode indicators. Later intrusion quality should be assessed ecologically while controlling for immediate distress and arousal (Ehlers et al., 2012; Varma et al., 2024).

Support for SOH would be shown if later intrusion quality differs between conditions despite similar levels of immediate distress.

Potential Disconfirmations

SOH would be substantially weakened by several forms of evidence.

First, the model would be weakened if symbolic objectification failed to predict later intrusion quality after severity, arousal, dissociation, and executive vulnerability were controlled.

Second, the model would be weakened if defensive capture indices showed no meaningful relation to shifts in symbolic objectification during engagement.

Third, the model would be weakened if trauma-focused treatment reduced immersive re-experiencing without measurable improvement in symbolic objectification restoration or reduction in capture dynamics.

Fourth, the model's boundary conditions would be challenged if shutdown dissociation reliably improved continuity and contextual integration during activation rather than degrading them.

7. Relation to Prevailing PTSD and Trauma Models

SOH is not intended to replace existing models of PTSD and traumatic stress. Rather, it is proposed as an upstream representational mechanism that may help explain when downstream processes such as contextualization, appraisal-based updating, and therapeutic integration succeed or fail during threat activation.

7.1. Relation to Dual Representation and Contextualization Accounts

SOH is broadly compatible with dual representation and contextualization accounts of trauma memory. These models emphasize that persistent posttraumatic symptoms are associated with retrieval that is insufficiently contextualized and experienced as timeless or present-oriented rather than as a past event (Brewin et al., 1996). SOH accepts this downstream characterization but adds a more proximal gating mechanism. Specifically, the model proposes that when symbolic objectification fails and defensive capture occurs, the individual becomes less able to sustain the sequencing, temporal anchoring, and context binding needed for autobiographical placement. In this sense, SOH is offered not as an alternative to contextualization models, but as an account of one condition under which contextual integration becomes unreliable.

7.2. Relation to Cognitive Models of PTSD and Appraisal-Based Frameworks

SOH is also compatible with cognitive models that emphasize maladaptive appraisals, cue-driven retrieval, and incomplete safety updating (Ehlers et al., 2012). Its distinct contribution is to specify a point at which these processes may fail under activation. A person may be fully able to endorse safety-based appraisals when not engaged with the traumatic memory, yet lose effective access to those appraisals when representational format destabilizes during engagement. If defensive capture occurs, appraisal and updating may become difficult not because corrective knowledge is absent, but because executive continuity and contextual access become unreliable in the moment.

7.3. Relation to Regulation, Self-Distancing, and Decentering

SOH is similarly consistent with work on self-distancing, decentering, and reappraisal. These approaches suggest that cognitive stance can alter emotional responding and recruit prefrontal

regulatory systems (Ayduk & Kross, 2008; Ochsner et al., 2002, 2004). SOH does not dispute these findings, but shifts emphasis from strategy labels to achieved state. Its central claim is that the relevant determinant is not whether a person nominally uses reappraisal or distancing, but whether symbolic objectification is actually achieved and maintained while activation is present. From this perspective, regulatory strategies matter primarily insofar as they preserve executive continuity and reduce the likelihood of defensive capture.

7.4. Relation to Threat Imminence and Defensive Cascade Traditions

SOH also aligns with models emphasizing current threat, imminence, and shifts in defensive responding. However, it proposes a more specific proximal mechanism than threat intensity or imminence alone. The key distinction in SOH is whether threat is represented as a bounded object of cognition or as an immersive, agentially immediate field of experience. This representational contrast is hypothesized to influence whether mobilization remains organized or shifts into defensive capture. The model further links this transition to measurable discontinuity and recovery dynamics during engagement (Etkin et al., 2011; Urry et al., 2006; Kim et al., 2011).

8. Clinical Implications

SOH has direct clinical implications because it reframes the target of trauma-focused work. The proposed target is not simply distress reduction, but the ability to restore and maintain symbolic objectification under activation so that mobilization remains compatible with executive continuity, contextual integration, and updating.

8.1. The Clinical Problem Addressed by SOH

Many trauma-focused interventions require direct engagement with traumatic memories or cues. SOH predicts that treatment response will vary in part according to whether this engagement preserves symbolic objectification or repeatedly disrupts it. If engagement repeatedly leads to defensive capture, the session may be highly emotionally intense without reliably producing integration. Under such conditions, the cognitive functions needed for adaptive processing, including continuity, sequencing, and contextual integration, may be intermittently unavailable. The memory may therefore remain prone to immersive re-experiencing rather than becoming more firmly anchored as a past event (Brewin et al., 1996; Ehlers et al., 2012).

8.2. Two Clinical Targets That Should Be Distinguished

SOH suggests that two treatment targets should be distinguished. The first is an **upstream target**: the capacity to restore and maintain symbolic objectification during activation, such that traumatic material can be held as a bounded object of cognition while orientation and working continuity remain intact. The second is a **downstream stabilization target**: when defensive capture or shutdown has already occurred, the immediate clinical task is to restore orientation and continuity before attempting further trauma processing.

This distinction matters because intense engagement without preserved continuity may be mistaken for therapeutic depth when it may instead reflect dysregulated immersion or shutdown.

8.3. A Practical Sequencing Principle

If a client cannot reliably sustain symbolic objectification during engagement, treatment may benefit from temporarily shifting focus toward restoring the conditions that support integration. These include helping the client maintain a bounded representation of the material, sustain observer-capable tracking without drifting into detachment, preserve a stepwise thread of sequence, and use labeling or other symbolic mediation while remaining in contact with the material.

SOH does not imply that emotion must be reduced before processing can be effective. Rather, it suggests that outcomes may improve when emotional activation remains compatible with continuity and contextual access during engagement (Ehlers et al., 2012).

8.4. What Should Be Measured Clinically

SOH also suggests refinements in session-level monitoring. Clinicians may benefit from tracking brief indicators of symbolic objectification during engagement, including boundedness, labelability, and manipulability of the active material. They may also track brief continuity markers, such as thread loss, sequencing failure, or slowed recovery following emotionally activating moments. State dissociative symptoms should be monitored concurrently to avoid mistaking detachment for successful regulation or integration.

9. Limitations and Alternative Explanations

SOH is proposed as a mechanism model rather than a comprehensive theory of trauma. Several limitations and competing explanations should therefore be considered.

9.1. Construct Overlap and Boundary Challenges

A first limitation concerns construct overlap. Symbolic objectification is conceptually adjacent to constructs such as psychological distance, decentering, temporal contextualization, and threat imminence. The viability of SOH therefore depends on maintaining clear operational separation. In this framework, symbolic objectification is defined specifically as bounded object-mode representation under conditions of intact executive continuity. It is not defined by reduced distress, coherent narration, or favorable outcome.

9.2. Alternative Account 1: Hippocampal or Context-Binding Failure

One competing explanation is that contextual integration fails primarily because of stress-related limits on hippocampal binding, with present-oriented reliving emerging as a downstream consequence. SOH can accommodate this possibility, but differs by predicting that state-level failures of symbolic objectification and defensive capture during engagement will explain variance beyond contextual binding outcomes themselves. Evidence favoring the alternative would show that binding measures strongly predict later re-experiencing, with little incremental value from symbolic objectification or defensive capture measures.

9.3. Alternative Account 2: Catecholaminergic Disruption of Executive Continuity

A second possibility is that stress neurochemistry directly disrupts working memory and executive continuity, independent of representational format. SOH does not deny that neurochemical effects may contribute. Its stronger claim is that symbolic objectification helps determine when such disruption becomes manifest as capture-like discontinuity with slowed recovery. Evidence against SOH would show that continuity failure is fully explained by physiological or arousal-based indices, with no incremental contribution from shifts in symbolic objectification.

9.4. Alternative Account 3: Salience Dominance Without Representational Specificity

Another competing interpretation is that defensive capture reflects broad salience-network dominance rather than any format-specific feature of representation. On this view, discontinuity and reliving would be predicted sufficiently by general salience processes, without requiring a distinct role for symbolic objectification. SOH would be weakened if salience-related measures predicted discontinuity, recovery, and later reliving as well as or better than objectification measures, with no added value from representational state.

9.5. Generalizability and Clinical Heterogeneity

Finally, SOH is most directly focused on threat-linked PTSD-like persistence. It may not fully account for phenomena such as moral injury, prolonged grief, complex developmental trauma, or situations of ongoing objective danger, each of which may involve additional mechanisms. In particular, ongoing threat may constrain symbolic objectification because the proposition that danger is over may be only partially true. These boundary conditions should be tested directly rather than assumed.

10. Conclusions

The Symbolic Objectification Hypothesis proposes that traumatic persistence is shaped in part by whether threat can be maintained in symbolic object form, as a bounded object of cognition with executive continuity preserved, or whether that representational state collapses into immersive action mode, increasing the likelihood of defensive capture. Within this framework, mobilization is understood as graded and potentially compatible with organized cognition. The key determinant of persistent present-oriented reliving is proposed to be not arousal magnitude alone, but whether activation remains compatible with continuity and contextual integration during encoding and subsequent reactivation (Brewin et al., 1996; Etkin et al., 2011; Phelps & LeDoux, 2005).

SOH offers a testable framework. It predicts that symbolic objectification state and restoration capacity can be measured during standardized engagement, that defensive capture can be indexed through within-person discontinuity and recovery dynamics, and that these processes will predict later real-world intrusion qualities, especially present-oriented reliving and reduced contextual integration (Ehlers et al., 2012; Varma et al., 2024).

Clinically, the model suggests that trauma-focused interventions may vary in effectiveness when engagement with traumatic material repeatedly disrupts symbolic objectification and triggers defensive capture. If so, treatment may become more reliable when it includes explicit procedures designed to restore symbolic objectification under activation while preserving continuity rather than inducing shutdown. On this view, the path to integration depends not simply on contacting traumatic material, but on the form in which that material can be held while the person remains cognitively present to it.

A broader implication of SOH is that it reframes traumatic persistence around representational stability during activation rather than arousal magnitude alone. Existing models have identified contextual integration failure, maladaptive appraisals, and impaired updating as key contributors to persistent symptoms. SOH complements these accounts by proposing a proximal mechanism that helps determine when those downstream processes remain available during threat engagement. Specifically, the model suggests that the ability to maintain symbolic objectification under activation may determine whether emotional mobilization remains compatible with executive continuity and contextual integration. If supported empirically, this perspective would help explain variability in trauma outcomes under similar levels of distress and may clarify why some forms of trauma engagement reliably promote integration whereas others repeatedly reproduce immersive re-experiencing.

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