A mood-as-input account of perseverative checking: the relationship between stop rules, mood and confidence in having checked successfully

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Abstract

The present paper reports the results of two experiments designed to test predictions from the mood-as-input account of perseverative checking. Using an analogue checking task, both experiments showed that perseveration, as indicted by a range of measures relevant to compulsive checking, was affected by the configuration of the stop rule for the task and mood at the outset of checking. Perseveration was most significant in the condition that most closely resembled the characteristics of obsessive-compulsive checkers (negative mood combined with a stop rule that specifies that the task should be done as thoroughly as possible—namely, an 'as many as can' stop rule). The studies also indicated that confidence at having completed the checking task successfully was (1) significantly related to the use of 'as many as can' stop rules at the outset of checking, (2) mood ratings at the end of checking, and (3) checking perseveration generally. These findings provide support for a mood-as-input explanation of perseverative psychopathologies such as compulsive checking, and begin to cast some light on how anxiety-reduction and 'confidence' models of compulsive checking, might be explained within broader mechanisms of perseveration.
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1. Introduction

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is a common and disabling condition that affects a significant percentage of the population at both clinical and sub-clinical levels. One specific form of OCD is compulsive checking where compulsive checkers engage in activities, such as repeatedly checking doors, locks, windows, etc. In comparison with noncheckers, checkers are generally more depressed and anxious and show higher levels of perfectionism and worry (Frost, Sher, & Geen, 1986; Gershuny & Sher, 1995; Steketee, Frost, & Cohen, 1998).

OC checking is an example of a number of perseverative psychopathologies characterized by the dysfunctional perseveration of certain thoughts, behaviours or activities, and other examples include pathological worrying, and rumination. Cognitive explanations of these perseverative psychopathologies have tended to be focused within individual disorders rather than addressing the possible common factors that might facilitate perseveration per se. Even though there is some evidence for co-morbidity across at least some of the perseverative disorders described (e.g. Andrews, Stewart, Morris-Yates, Holt, & Henderson, 1990; Schut, Castonguay, & Borkovec, 2001), suggesting the possibility of some common mechanisms operating across them, there have been few attempts to identify what these common mechanisms might be.

However, there has been one recent attempt to address the processes underlying pathological perseveration, and this model has already been applied to a number of perseverative psychopathologies. This model is known as the mood-as-input hypothesis (Martin & Davies, 1998; Martin, Ward, Achee, & Wyer, 1993), and it is centrally concerned with explaining how perseveration at a task is generated by the way in which mood is used as information in determining whether the goals of the task have been achieved, and the task should therefore be either be terminated or continued. The mood-as-input hypothesis proposes that it is an individual's interpretation of their mood rather than the mood per se that has particular performance implications. The mood-as-input hypothesis can best be explained by describing a study conducted by Martin et al. (1993). They induced either positive or negative moods in their participants and asked them to generate a list of birds' names. Half of the participants were told to stop generating the names of birds when they no longer felt like it (a 'feel like continuing' stop rule), whereas the other half were asked to stop when they thought they had generated as many as they could (an 'as many as can' stop rule). They found that the effect of mood on the generation task was dependent on the stop rule that the participant was asked to use. For the 'feel like continuing' stop rule group, participants in the positive mood persisted at the task for significantly longer than those in the negative mood. However, for the 'as many as can' stop rule group, participants in the negative mood persisted for significantly longer than those in the positive mood. Martin et al. (1993) interpreted these results in mood-as-input terms. For example, participants in a negative mood interpret their mood in relation to the stop rule. In the 'feel like continuing' condition, their negative mood tells them to stop. In the 'as many as can' condition, their negative mood tells them they are not satisfied with their performance on the task, and so they persist at the task for longer.

The mood-as-input model has already been successfully applied to understanding aspects of perseveration in two psychopathologies—catastrophic worrying (Startup & Davey, 2001, 2003) and depressive rumination (Watkins & Mason, 2002). For example, Startup and Davey (2001) tested some predictions from this explanation, and found that the degree to which worriers