



## Are habitual overgeneral recollection and prospection maladaptive?

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### ABSTRACT

**Background and objectives:** Individuals with depression exhibit difficulty retrieving specific memories and imagining specific future events when instructed to do so relative to non-clinical comparison groups. Instead of specific events, depressed individuals frequently retrieve or imagine “overgeneral” memories that span a long period of time or that denote a category of similar events. Recently, Raes, Hermans, Williams, and Eelen (2007) developed a sentence completion procedure (SCEPT) to assess the tendency to recall overgeneral autobiographical memories. They found that specificity on this measure was associated with depression and rumination. We aimed to replicate these findings and to examine the tendency to imagine overgeneral future events.

**Methods:** We had 170 subjects complete past (SCEPT) and future-oriented (SCEFT) sentence completion tasks and measures of depression severity, PTSD severity, hopelessness, and repetitive negative thought. **Results:** Although specificities of past and future events were correlated, neither SCEPT nor SCEFT specificity was negatively associated with depression severity, posttraumatic stress symptoms, repetitive negative thought (RNT), or hopelessness.

**Limitations:** Our data are cross-sectional, preventing any determination of causality and limiting our assessment of whether specificity is associated with psychological distress following a stressful life event. In addition, we observed poor internal consistency for both the SCEPT and SCEFT.

**Conclusions:** These findings fail to support the hypothesis that overgeneral memory and prospection on these tasks are associated with psychological distress.

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### 1. Introduction

Nearly three decades ago, Williams and Broadbent (1986) used an autobiographical memory task (AMT) to investigate mood congruent memory biases in patients who had recently attempted suicide. They presented subjects with a series of cue words and asked them to recall specific events from their lives (i.e., events lasting less than one day) in response to these words. They noticed that suicidal patients experienced difficulty recalling specific memories. Instead, patients often retrieved “overgeneral” memories denoting either a category of events or an event extending longer than one day.

Researchers have since used the AMT to assess memory specificity in other clinical populations. Overgeneral memory (OGM) occurs in depression (Williams et al., 2007), posttraumatic stress disorder (Moore & Zoellner, 2007), complicated grief (Maccallum & Bryant, 2010), schizophrenia (Warren & Haslam, 2007), and bipolar disorder (Scott, Stanton, Garland, & Ferrier, 2000). Furthermore, OGM may

constitute a risk factor for mental distress or disorders. Individuals with high OGM exhibit a greater increase in depressive symptoms with increasing number of negative life events relative to those with low OGM (Gibbs & Rude, 2004). van Minnen, Wessel, Verhaak, and Smeenk (2005) found that OGM prospectively predicted an increase in depressive symptoms in reaction to a stressful life event. Similarly, Kleim and Ehlers (2008) found that OGM measured 2 weeks following an assault prospectively predicted depression and PTSD symptom severity at 6-months post-assault after they controlled statistically for the effects of initial symptom severity.

However, research on OGM as a vulnerability factor has been hindered by the extremely low rates of OGM in studies with non-clinical subjects (Raes et al., 2007). At least two hypotheses may explain these low rates. First, in the absence of mental distress, individuals may not exhibit OGM at the same rates as do clinical subjects. Second, the AMT may be insufficiently sensitive to detect OGM in non-clinical populations.

Guided by the second hypothesis, Raes et al. (2007) designed an alternative assessment of OGM: the Sentence Completion for Events from the Past Test (SCEPT). In this task, subjects complete 11 sentence stems (e.g., “Last week I...”). In contrast to the AMT, the SCEPT does not instruct subjects to generate specific events.

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Accordingly, the SCEPT measures a general, default tendency to recall specific events rather than an ability to do so when instructed. In two studies with non-clinical samples, Raes et al. (2007) found that specificity on the SCEPT was negatively associated with depression and depressive rumination, whereas specificity on the AMT was not. They concluded that the SCEPT is a more sensitive measure of the tendency to recall overgeneral events in non-clinical populations than the AMT is, and hence more useful for identifying those at risk for depression.

### 1.1. The current study

In this study, we had three aims. First, we attempted to replicate Raes et al.'s (2007) findings on habitual overgeneral memory, depression, and rumination. We hypothesized that specificity on the SCEPT would be negatively associated with depression symptom severity and repetitive negative thought. Second, extending this approach, we used the sentence completion method to assess habitual overgeneral prospection and its relationship to psychological distress. The specificity with which one recalls past events in the AMT is associated with the specificity of episodic future thought in the AMT (Williams et al., 1996). Accordingly, we hypothesized that specificity for past events would be associated with specificity for future events. Based on previous research (MacLeod, Rose, & Williams, 1993; MacLeod et al., 2005; Williams et al., 1996), we further hypothesized that prospection specificity would be negatively associated with depression symptom severity and hopelessness. Finally, we aimed to determine whether habitual overgeneral memory and prospection were positively associated with increased psychological distress in response to stressful life events. That is, we hypothesized that greater past and future event specificity would be negatively associated with posttraumatic stress and event-specific repetitive negative thought.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Subjects

To investigate these issues, we invited individuals from Harvard University and the greater Boston area to complete a brief online survey. The sole inclusion criterion was a minimum age of 18. Subjects learned of the study through the Harvard University Department of Psychology's subject pool website. Students who participated in the study received course credit. One hundred and seventy subjects completed the survey; most were female ( $n = 134$ , 77.9%), Caucasian ( $n = 100$ , 58.1%), and between the ages of 18 and 24 ( $n = 149$ , 86.6%).

### 2.2. Procedure

Following completion of informed consent and a brief demographics questionnaire, subjects completed measures of habitual overgeneral memory and prospection (i.e., the SCEPT and SCEFT), depression symptoms, hopelessness, and the tendency to engage in repetitive negative thought. Subjects were then asked to recall and briefly describe a recent event in their life in which they felt "especially upset or distressed." Finally, subjects completed measures of posttraumatic stress symptoms and event-specific repetitive negative thought in reference to the identified event.

### 2.3. Measures

#### 2.3.1. Habitual overgeneral memory and prospection

Subjects completed past (SCEPT) and future-oriented (SCEFT) sentence completion tasks to assess overgeneral memory and

prospection. In each task, subjects completed 11 partial sentences (e.g., "Last week I...") with information about themselves and their lives. For both the SCEPT and SCEFT, subjects were instructed to use information about themselves and their lives to complete the sentences. The SCEFT items reflected the same phrasing and time periods as the 11 items of the SCEPT (e.g., "Next week I..."). All subjects completed the SCEPT prior to completing the SCEFT, and there was no time limit for either task.

Two independent raters blind to the study hypotheses coded SCEPT and SCEFT responses into one of four categories: specific event (i.e., a single event lasting less than one day), categoric event (i.e., a group of related events), extended event (i.e., an event lasting greater than one day), or semantic associate (i.e., information about oneself). To examine the psychological correlates of habitual overgeneral memory and prospection, we calculated the proportion of responses in which the subject provided a specific response. The independent raters jointly rated 110 responses for the SCEPT and the SCEFT. Inter-rater reliability for specificity was acceptable for both the SCEPT ( $\kappa = .76$ ) and SCEFT ( $\kappa = .67$ ).

#### 2.3.2. Psychological distress

We administered the Beck Hopelessness Scale (BHS; Beck, Weissman, Lester, & Trexler, 1974), Center for Epidemiological Studies – Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977), and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Checklist – Specific Version (PCL; Weathers, Litz, Herman, Huska, & Keane, 1993) to assess hopelessness, depression, and posttraumatic stress symptoms, respectively. For the PCL, subjects rated items in reference to a recent event that made them feel "especially upset or distressed."

#### 2.3.3. Repetitive negative thought

Subjects completed two measures of repetitive negative thinking: the 15-item Perseverative Thinking Questionnaire (PTQ; Ehring et al., 2011) and the 31-item Repetitive Thinking Questionnaire (RTQ; McEvoy, Mahoney, & Moulds, 2010). The PTQ assesses the general tendency to engage in repetitive negative thought (e.g., "the same thoughts keep going through my mind again and again"), whereas the latter assesses repetitive negative thought concerning a certain event or situation (e.g., "I thought about the situation all the time"). For the RTQ, subjects rated items in reference to a recent event that made them feel "especially upset or distressed." The original RTQ contains items in both first and second person (i.e., "I thought..." and "You had thoughts..."). To reduce subject burden, we rewrote all items in the first person. Both the PTQ and the RTQ have good reliability and validity (Ehring et al., 2011; McEvoy et al., 2010), and excellent internal consistency in the current sample ( $\alpha = .94$  and  $\alpha = .93$ , respectively).

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Sentence completion tasks

The mean ratings for the SCEPT and SCEFT appear in Table 1. Consistent with past research (Anderson & Dewhurst, 2009; D'Argembeau & Mathy, 2011), subjects were more specific when recalling the past than when imagining the future. When imagining the future, subjects were more likely to provide semantic responses than when recalling the past.

### 3.2. Associations among habitual overgeneral memory, prospection, and psychological distress

The correlations among SCEPT and SCEFT specificity and measures of psychological distress appear in Table 2. Consistent with our hypothesis, specificity on the SCEPT was significantly

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