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# The mood regulatory function of autobiographical recall is moderated by self-esteem

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## Abstract

This study investigated whether self-esteem (SE) moderates the mood regulation function of autobiographical memory. Music was used to induce a negative mood in participants. Mood was then assessed following one of three tasks: (1) free recall participants were not constrained to retrieve memories of a particular valence; (2) directed recall participants were told to retrieve positive memories; and (3) control participants completed arithmetic problems. It was found that high SE participants recalled more positive memories than did low SE participants in the free recall condition. Consequently, the high SE participants experienced a greater elevation in mood. Memory positivity was equivalent for the high and low SE participants in the directed recall task. Moreover, both high and low SE participants showed an improvement in mood following directed recall of positive memories, although this improvement was less pronounced in the low SE group. No mood change was found in the control condition. The results suggest that individual differences in SE moderate mood regulation by autobiographical recall. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Mood; Autobiographical recall; Self-esteem; Affect; Memory; Cognitive control

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## 1. Introduction

The relationship between mood states and memory processes is at the centre of many cognitive models of affect (e.g. Bower, 1981; Ellis & Ashbrook, 1989) and of cognitive models of depression in particular (Blaney, 1986). These models assume that the relationship between affective states and memory is reciprocal. Consistent with that assumption is the mood congruency effect whereby affectively valenced material is more likely to be attended to and/or recalled when one is in a mood consistent with that content (Blaney, 1986).

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Although many studies have reported mood congruency effects (e.g. Bower, Gilligan, & Monteiro, 1981; Clark & Teasdale, 1982; McDowall, 1984; Teasdale & Taylor, 1981; Teasdale, Taylor, & Fogarty, 1980), several reviews on this topic have noted an asymmetry in the influence of positive and negative moods on memory and behaviour (e.g. Blaney, 1986; Isen, 1984), such that mood congruency effects have been found more consistently for positive than for negative moods. To account for this asymmetry, Clark and Isen (1982) proposed a mood regulation hypothesis. They suggested that negative moods do not consistently lead to mood congruency effects because individuals may be motivated to regulate aversive mood states. The mood regulation hypothesis assumes that people employ a variety of strategies to regulate their moods, one of which is the recall of mood incongruent information.

Recent research has identified several factors that govern whether mood incongruent recall will be effective in attenuating mood states, as well as the likelihood that an individual will engage in mood regulation. These include participants' awareness of the relevance of mood to the experiment (e.g. Parrott & Sabini, 1990), the effortfulness of the task (e.g. Erber & Erber, 1994; Erber & Tesser, 1992), and personality variables such as self-esteem (e.g. Dodgson & Wood, 1998; Smith & Petty, 1995).

The present study investigated autobiographical memory in individuals with high and low self-esteem (SE) as they experienced a negative mood. The experiment was designed as a conceptual replication of a Smith and Petty (1995) experiment in which participants, after undergoing either a neutral or negative mood induction, were required to recall autobiographical memories. Smith and Petty found that, following the neutral mood induction, high and low SE participants recalled equally positive memories, whereas in the negative mood induction, high SE participants recalled more positive memories than did low SE participants. This interaction was interpreted as evidence for attempts at mood regulation on the part of the high SE participants. However, mood was not assessed following the autobiographical recall task, so the extent to which mood incongruent recall regulated mood was not determined.

In the present study a musical mood induction procedure was utilized to induce a negative mood. Music was chosen as the most appropriate method because it is more likely to avoid priming effects that may occur with other induction procedures. For example, viewing videos (Josephson, Singer, & Salovey, 1996; Smith & Petty, 1995) may trigger the recall of particular autobiographical events. The task that followed the music mood induction varied across three conditions. In the free recall condition, participants were instructed to recall any three autobiographical memories. Given the results of Smith and Petty (1995), it was expected that high SE participants would recall more positive memories than the low SE participants.

In the directed recall condition, participants were asked explicitly to "recall three positive memories" (i.e. memories that are incongruent with the induced mood). This procedure was designed to determine whether the mood regulation effect of mood incongruent recall is dependent on the spontaneous nature of that recall as opposed to merely the content of the recall. Wenzlaff (1993) suggested that simply telling depressed individuals to recall something incongruent with their mood would not result in the attenuation of mood. Rather, individuals must perceive their mood incongruent thoughts to be self-initiated so that they experience a state of dissonance between their present mood and thoughts. This state of dissonance is crucial as an impetus for resolution by a change in mood. However, when an individual is exhorted by outside influences to think incongruent thoughts, the state of dissonance would not be produced because

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