



## Effect of visual perspective on memory and interpretation in dysphoria

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### ABSTRACT

When engaging in self-reflection, the visual perspective one adopts has important effects on emotional reactivity. Specifically, adopting a distanced stance, or viewing oneself from a third-person perspective, has been found to reduce emotional reactivity to negative autobiographical memories. The effect of adopting this perspective is moderated by depression such that reactivity is not reduced for individuals with particularly low levels of depressive symptoms. In the current study, we examine the effects of visual perspective on two forms of mental imagery in dysphoric and nondysphoric individuals. We attempt to replicate previous findings for recall of sad autobiographical memories and extend this research to interpretation of ambiguous situations. The results suggest that the effects of adopting a distanced stance are not moderated by depressive symptoms and do not extend from memories to interpretations of ambiguous situations.

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Self-reflection, or thinking about one's own thoughts, feelings, and experiences, is thought to be a valuable means of increasing self-knowledge. Different forms of self-reflection, including expressive writing (Pennebaker, Mayne, & Francis, 1997) and mindfulness, or nonjudgmental self-awareness (Baer, 2003), are associated with improved psychological well-being. However, some forms of self-reflection are counterproductive and lead to undesirable outcomes (Borkovec, Robinson, Pruzinsky, & Depree, 1983; Kashdan & Roberts, 2007; Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco, & Lyubomirsky, 2008). Self-reflection may therefore be adaptive or maladaptive depending on the specific form it takes (Trapnell & Campbell, 1999; Watkins, 2008).

In an intriguing line of research, Kross and Ayduk have proposed that the visual perspective one adopts while engaging in self-reflection may be critically important to determining whether such thought is adaptive or maladaptive (e.g., Kross, Ayduk, & Mischel, 2005). When recalling memories or engaging in mental imagery, one can adopt either a field perspective, in which one views the event from one's own perspective ("through one's own eyes"), or an observer perspective, in which one views the situation as an outside observer, as if one were watching a movie starring oneself (Nigro & Neisser, 1983). Individuals are more likely to recall memories from a field perspective when asked to focus on the emotional aspects, rather than the objective circumstances, of

a situation (Nigro & Neisser, 1983). Conversely, when asked to recall a memory from the field perspective, individuals are more likely to focus on the emotional aspects of that memory than when asked to adopt an observer perspective (Holmes, Coughtrey, & Connor, 2008; Mclsaac & Eich, 2002). Robinson and Swanson (1993) found that when participants switched from field to observer perspective for the same autobiographical memory, emotional reactivity to the memory was reduced. Finally, individuals with PTSD who spontaneously recalled trauma memories from an observer perspective recalled fewer emotional reactions and psychological states than those who spontaneously adopted a field perspective (Mclsaac & Eich, 2004).

Kross and Ayduk have extended these findings from memory recall to emotional processing of the memories, which they have operationalized as "asking why" one experienced particular emotions. When participants are asked to contemplate why they felt the way they did, doing so from an observer (or "distanced") perspective leads to less emotional reactivity than a field (or "immersed") perspective. They have found similar effects of distanced analysis for memories of anger (Ayduk & Kross, 2008; Kross et al., 2005)<sup>1</sup> and sadness (Kross & Ayduk, 2008). The benefits of adopting a distanced perspective extend from the moment of recall to at least seven days later (Kross & Ayduk, 2008) and are

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<sup>1</sup> One failure to replicate the effect of distanced analysis on memories of anger has been reported in the literature; however, subsequent analyses indicated that this replication failure was likely due to insufficient statistical power (Ayduk & Kross, 2009; Wimalaweera & Moulds, 2008).

seen in both self-report and physiological measures of emotional reactivity (blood-pressure reactivity, Ayduk & Kross, 2008). Gruber, Harvey, and Johnson (2009) found a similar pattern of results for distanced and immersed analysis of positive autobiographical memories. They found that distanced analysis was associated with reduced experience of positive emotion according to self-report and heart-rate indices, although they found no effect on other psychophysiological indicators. Therefore, the general finding that distanced analysis reduces emotional reactivity has been found for memories eliciting anger, sadness, and positive emotions.

The short-term benefits of distanced analysis of negative memories appear to be more pronounced in individuals with high levels of depressive symptoms. In an analysis collapsing across five experiments, the impact of distanced analysis increased linearly as depressive symptoms increased (Kross & Ayduk, 2009). Specifically, distanced analysis was found to result in reduced reactivity for all individuals except those with especially low levels of depressive symptoms (<1 SD below the mean). This result mirrors findings that self-focused rumination is only detrimental for individuals with depressive symptoms. A large body of research on depressive rumination has found that inducing rumination leads to more negative mood for dysphoric and clinically depressed, but not nondysphoric, individuals (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008). Similarly, the results reported by Kross and Ayduk (2009) suggest that immersed analysis may only be detrimental in the context of at least some depressive symptoms.

Several methodological issues merit consideration before accepting Kross and Ayduk's (2009) conclusions, however. By integrating data across five different experiments, the authors were forced to collapse across two types of memory content (anger-eliciting and sadness-eliciting) and several different measures of emotional reactivity, which may have influenced their results. For example, the failure to find an effect of condition among individuals with low levels of depressive symptoms may be due to the increased error associated with collapsing across different measures of both the independent and dependent variables. And because three of the five studies and over half of the total participants focused on anger-eliciting, rather than sadness-eliciting memories, it is also unclear whether the moderating effect of depressive symptoms is present for sad memories. In the current study, we address these limitations by focusing exclusively on sad memories, which are most relevant to cognitive theories of depression, and by standardizing the measures of emotional reactivity used for all study participants.

Much of the research on distanced analysis has focused on autobiographical memories. However, visual perspective is relevant not only for memory, but for other forms of mental imagery as well. Mental imagery has been found to be more emotionally evocative than verbal processing of the same stimuli, and mental imagery has emerged as an important factor in modifying interpretations of ambiguous stimuli (Holmes, Lang, & Shah, 2009; Holmes & Mathews, 2010). In this study, we seek to extend the investigation of distanced analysis from an exclusive focus on autobiographical memories to interpretation imagery. Interpretation imagery may be particularly relevant for individuals with depressive symptoms because cognitive theories of depression assign an important role to the interpretation of ambiguous situations (Beck, 1967). Depressed individuals are thought to interpret such ambiguous situations in a negatively biased way, and these negatively biased interpretations are thought to maintain depressive symptoms by providing support for negative self-beliefs and by contributing to negative memory biases (Beck, 1967; Hertel, Brozovich, Joormann, & Gotlib, 2008). Much of the evidence for interpretation biases in depression comes from tasks that do not explicitly encourage mental imagery, including the resolution of

ambiguous homophones or asking participants to read ambiguous sentences or vignettes (e.g., Krantz & Hammen, 1979; Mogg, Bradbury, & Bradley, 2006; Wisco & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2010; but see also Lawson, MacLeod, & Hammond, 2002, for a more imagery-based assessment). Given the increasingly prominent role of mental imagery in the modification of interpretation biases (e.g., Holmes et al., 2009), it is important to examine whether similar depression-linked effects are found for interpretation imagery, and what effect the visual perspective of the imagery has on these biases. For this study, we selected an existing measure of interpretation bias found to be sensitive to depression-linked differences, the Interpretation Bias Questionnaire (IBQ, Wisco & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2010) and modified it to encourage more mental imagery. The IBQ offers the opportunity to examine two interpretation processes: the generation of possible interpretations and the selection of one interpretation as most likely. We have found previously that depressive biases exist for both generation and selection of interpretations and that considering others, rather than oneself, reduces emotional reactivity for dysphoric individuals (Wisco & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2010). In this study, we examine whether viewing the self as an other, by adopting a distanced stance, leads to a similar decrease in emotional reactivity. We also investigate whether adopting a distanced stance changes the valence of interpretations, by encouraging less negative interpretation generation and selection.

In this study, we aim to replicate the findings that distanced analysis leads to reduced emotional reactivity to sad memories and that depressive symptoms moderate this effect. We also examine interpretation imagery, in order to investigate whether depressive biases in interpretation are seen when using imagery-based assessment, and to determine whether the benefits of distanced analysis extend from clearly negative memories to interpretations of ambiguous situations, in terms of both emotional reactivity and cognitive content.

## Method

### Participants

One hundred and thirty individuals recruited from flyers posted in the community or the psychology subject pool participated in this study for either a payment of 15 US dollars or course credit. Nineteen participants no longer met the BDI-II cut-off criteria at the time of testing and were excluded from the analyses. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 30 with a mean age of 21.8 (SD = 3.5); 43 (38.7%) participants were male and 68 (61.3%) were female. Participants reported their race/ethnicity as: 54 (48.6%) Caucasian, 25 (22.5%) Asian, 18 (16.2%) African-American, 9 (8.1%) Hispanic, 4 (3.6%) "Other." One participant declined to answer this question.

### Materials

#### Memory imagery

In an attempt to replicate previous memory findings, we included the memory imagery task described by Kross and Ayduk (2008). In this version of the measure, participants are instructed to recall a time from their past when they felt sad or depressed. They are first instructed to form a vivid image of the memory from either an immersed or a distanced perspective and then to consider why they had those feelings. Participants listened to these instructions which were provided on digital audio files.

#### Reexperiencing of emotion

Two emotional reactivity questions from Kross et al. (2005) were included. These questions were "To what extent did you

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