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## The effect of being a victim or witness of family violence on the retrieval of autobiographical memories

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### Abstract

**Objective:** This study was designed to determine whether greater reliance on general memory retrieval in children was related to depression, and whether family violence affected the specificity of children's memory retrieval.

**Method:** We compared children who had experienced some form of family violence with children who had never experienced any form of family violence, based on their responses to questions concerning child-parent and interparental disagreements.

**Results:** As expected, there was a positive correlation between the extent of "generic-categoric" memory retrieval and depression level. There was no evidence, however, that autobiographical memory was affected by family violence.

**Conclusions:** This study is the first to report significant associations between depression and autobiographical memory style in children. The results suggest that the effect of family violence on children's memory retrieval may be mediated by depression. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Family violence; Autobiographical memories; Depression

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## Introduction

Research on autobiographical memory has demonstrated that depressed adults, as well as adults who have undergone traumatic experiences, have difficulty retrieving memories of specific events, describing general memories in response to requests for specific examples. Such general memories summarize several individual episodes by reference to their common characteristics, instead of specifying distinctive information about particular events, people, places, or activities (Williams, 1996). To date, studies of overgeneral memories have focused on memories retrieved by adults in response to cue words presented in laboratory contexts. By contrast, the goal of the present study was to investigate memory retrieval by children responding to questions about actual family interactions. The study was designed to explore whether greater reliance on overgeneral memory retrieval was related to depression in children, as it is in adults, and whether family violence affected the specificity of children's memory retrieval.

Several researchers have reported that depressed adults often rely on overgeneral modes of memory retrieval. For example, Williams and Broadbent (1986) found that patients who had recently attempted suicide tended to retrieve overgeneral, rather than specific, memories in response to both positive and negative cue words, even though they were instructed to retrieve specific memories. Moore, Watts, and Williams (1988) subsequently found that depressed patients were more likely than patients with other diagnoses to generate overgeneral memories in response to similar cue words, and several researchers (Brewin, Reynolds, & Tata, 1999; Croll & Bryant, 2000; Harvey, Bryant, & Dang, 1998; Kuyken & Brewin, 1995; Kuyken & Dalgleish, 1995; Puffet, Jehin-Marchot, Timsit-Berthier, & Timsit, 1991; Williams, 1992; Williams et al., 1996; Williams & Dritschel, 1988; Williams & Scott, 1988) have shown that overgeneral recall is characteristic of both suicidal and depressed patients. In addition, the proportion of generic responses to positive and negative cue words on Williams' Autobiographical Memory Test (AMT; Williams, 1993) predicted the failure to recover from depression over a seven month period (Brittlebank, Scott, Williams, & Ferrier, 1993).

Many attempts have been made to explain why overgeneral memory retrieval occurs (Barsalou, 1988; Conway & Bekerian, 1987; Kolodner, 1983; Kuyken & Brewin, 1995; Neisser, 1988; Norman & Bobrow, 1979; Puffet et al., 1991; Reiser, Black, & Abelson, 1985; Williams, 1992, 1996; Williams & Hollan, 1981; Williams & Scott, 1988). Some researchers have focused on the molecular effects of trauma and stress on the brain (e.g., Bremner, 1999; Bremner & Narayan, 1998; Bremner, Southwick, & Charney, 1999), whereas others have sought to find clues in close analyses of memory processes. Specifically, some theorists (e.g., Conway, 1997; Conway & Bekerian, 1987; Williams, 1992) suggest that encoding and retrieval should be viewed as hierarchical processes, sequentially progressing from more general to more specific information. The ease with which information is accessed and the degree to which retrieval is specific depend on the specificity of both the encoding and retrieval search processes. If distinctive details were not encoded, attempts to go beyond a general memory at the time of retrieval will fail. Because general information is retrieved before more specific information, difficulty accessing specific information can arise not only

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