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Regret as autobiographical memory [☆]

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ABSTRACT

We apply an autobiographical memory framework to the study of regret. Focusing on the distinction between regrets for specific and general events we argue that the temporal profile of regret, usually explained in terms of the action–inaction distinction, is predicted by models of autobiographical memory. In two studies involving participants in their sixties we demonstrate a reminiscence bump for general, but not for specific regrets. Recent regrets were more likely to be specific than general in nature. Coding regrets as actions/inactions revealed that general regrets were significantly more likely to be due to inaction while specific regrets were as likely to be due to action as to inaction. In Study 2 we also generalised all of these findings to a group of participants in their 40s. We re-interpret existing accounts of the temporal profile of regret within the autobiographical memory framework, and outline the practical and theoretical advantages of our memory-based distinction over traditional decision-making approaches to the study of regret.

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1. Introduction

It's better to have something to remember than nothing to regret—Frank Zappa

Autobiographical memory (AM) is memory for the personal past and it combines recollected personally experienced events and factual knowledge about the self. The AM framework encompasses the spectrum of memorable experience and represents a broad range of interests and methodologies. We focus on research concerned with the lifespan distribution of AMs and the method of relevance to the

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present studies is *Crovitz and Schiffman's* (1974) word-cue paradigm in which people are presented with a word and asked to recall a specific memory associated with it. This method is relevant because whenever regret researchers ask people to describe their regrets they are effectively eliciting an autobiographical memory using a categorical cue, but because the responses are seen as regrets the focus has been on the descriptive, cognitive, affective and structural attributes relevant to an understanding of regret. So far these attributes have included content (*Roese & Summerville, 2005*), automatic vs elaborative reasoning (*Kahneman, 1995*), hot or wistful affective profiles (*Gilovich, Medvec, & Kahneman, 1998*), and temporal duration and agency (*Gilovich & Medvec, 1995*). To our knowledge, they do not yet include memory type.

Memory is the medium through which we experience our regrets, but it is also what they are made of, and yet this aspect of regret is largely unexplored. Regret researchers either ignore memory completely or see it solely as a venue for more interesting reasoning processes, while memory researchers show little direct interest in regret as an emotion with unique mnemonic characteristics. Generally speaking, the study of emotion in AM concerns the relative influences of variables related to valence and intensity (for an overview see *Levine & Pizzaro, 2004*), and yet much AM research concerns experiences easily accommodated by regret. Memories for transitional educational experiences (*Pillemer, Picariello, Law, & Reichman, 1996*), first-time romantic episodes (*Robinson, 1992b*), 'benchmark events' (*Elnick, Margrett, Fitzgerald, & Labouvie-Vief, 1999*) or self-defining memories (*Singer & Salovey, 1993*) could all involve regret. Viewing regret from a memory perspective requires a slight shift of emphasis, but the way regret has traditionally been defined has not encouraged such a shift.

1.1. Regret as a decision-making phenomenon

Two commonly used definitions of regret come from *Landman (1993)*, who describes it as "a more or less painful cognitive and emotional state of feeling sorry for misfortunes, limitations, losses, transgressions, shortcomings, or mistakes" (p. 36), and *Zeelenberg (1999)*, who describes it as "a negative, cognitively based emotion that we experience when realising or imagining that our present situation would have been better had we acted differently" (p. 326). Both definitions acknowledge by implication regret's connection to past events, though neither explicitly mentions the past or memory. The emphasis instead is on the appraisal of decision outcomes, making regret attractive to decision theorists, who have long recognised its influence in both retrospective and prospective judgements (for summaries see *Connolly & Zeelenberg, 2002*; *Landman, 1993*; and *Mellers, Schwartz, & Ritov, 1999*).

Because regret involves comparisons between what is and what might have been it is described as a *counterfactual* emotion (*Kahneman & Miller, 1986*), or as the 'emotional offspring' of counterfactual thinking (*Roese, 2005*). Counterfactual thinking has expanded as a research domain among social (*Roese, 1997*; *Roese & Olson, 1995*) and cognitive (*Byrne, 2005*) psychologists, but the signature study of counterfactual thinking in regret comes from the judgement and decision-making literature and concerns the role of agency in determining an individual's affective response to a bad outcome. In a frequently cited and replicated study, *Kahneman and Tversky (1982)* presented a scenario involving two investors, George and Paul, who, for different reasons, find themselves \$1200 worse off than they could have been. George misses the opportunity as a consequence of his actions (buying new stock when he would have profited from sticking with existing stock) while Paul misses out through inaction (by holding on to his original stock when buying new stock was the profitable option). Although the outcome is the same for both men, when asked to estimate who would feel more regret, 92% of people opted for George, the actor. *Kahneman and Tversky (1982)* explain this attribution of greater regret for the actor as being due to the relative ease with which the alternatives can be imagined. In their view a state of inaction is the norm or default setting and so an action deviates from normality. It is easier therefore to imagine George reversing the action and restoring normality than it is to imagine undoing Paul's situation from inaction to action.

This 'action effect' has been shown to apply for both negative and positive emotions (*Gilovich & Medvec, 1994*, studies 2 and 3; *Gleicher et al., 1990*; *Landman, 1987*), and it continues to be explored in vignettes (*Byrne & McEleney, 2000*; *Feeney & Handley, 2006*; *Zeelenberg, van der Bos, van Dijk, & Pieters, 2002*). By locating regret within a decision-making framework and emphasising the role of

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