

Deteriorating memory confidence, responsibility perceptions and repeated checking: Comparisons in OCD and control samples

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Abstract

Repeated checking has been repeatedly associated with memory distrust. We sought to extend previous research using a computer-based checking task by incorporating a group of 15 individuals with OCD, and examining the effect of increased perceived responsibility. Participants were asked to repeatedly check a virtual stove top, with half the participants also placed under a condition of high-perceived responsibility. Our observations replicated previous research showing that the act of repeatedly checking leads to reductions in memory vividness, detail and confidence, without accompanying reductions in memory accuracy. Furthermore, while a sense of increased personal responsibility had little effect on a student control sample, it led to a significant further deterioration in memory confidence in individuals with OCD. These results suggest that in people with OCD, normal reductions in memory confidence over repeated trials are exacerbated and intensified by inflated responsibility perceptions.

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Introduction

Obsessive–compulsive disorder (OCD) is a disabling condition associated with significant social (Riggs, Hiss, & Foa, 1992) and occupational (Leon, Portera, & Weissman, 1995) impairment, as well as overall reduction in quality of life (Eisen et al., 2006). Compulsive checking is the single most common compulsive behaviour shown by patients with OCD (Hermans, Martens, De Cort, Pieters, & Eelen, 2003). This research aims to further investigate the interaction of memory confidence and responsibility perceptions on compulsive checking behaviour.

It is noteworthy that numerous studies have failed to find a generalised memory deficit in OCD patients (Tolin et al., 2001; Tuna, Tekcan, & Topçuoğlu, 2005). A small number of research studies also report improved memory in individuals with OCD for threat-related information (e.g. Radomsky & Rachman, 1999;

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Radomsky, Rachman, & Hammond, 2001). Tolin et al. (2001) speculated an alternative to a general mnemonic deficit theory, in which OCD patients showed memory deficits that were specific to their disorder. According to this theory, patients with OCD may show memory problems only where threat-related objects or actions are concerned. Woods, Vevea, Chambless, and Bayen (2002), in a meta-analysis of five studies on memory confidence in OCD, concluded that individuals with OCD reported significantly lower confidence in recognition memory. Similar results have been found by other authors using different methodologies (e.g., Cougle, Salkovskis, & Wahl, 2007; Karadag, Oguzhanoglu, Ozdel, Atesci, & Amuk, 2005; Tolin et al., 2001).

The idea that repeated checking paradoxically causes memory distrust was advanced by van den Hout and Kindt (2003a), using a simulated six-burner gas stove and checking task. In this study, a group of student participants were required to repeatedly turn on, turn off, and check a simulated three-dimensional (3D) stovetop over a series of 20 trials. After the repeated checking, participants were asked to report the vividness, detail and memory confidence for the last check of the stovetop. In comparison to another checking task (involving virtual lightbulbs) that was performed only once, participants reported significant deterioration in memory confidence, related to the vividness and detail of their memory. The authors used these findings to argue that the act of repeatedly checking leads to changes in the way the memory is processed. Specifically, the authors suggested that repeated checking leads an individual to consolidate the larger number of checks into a single memory prototype rather than maintain independent recollections of each separate check. When such a consolidated memory is formed, this leads to reduced vividness and detail of each independent memory, and subsequently, reduced confidence in one's memory.

van den Hout and Kindt (2003b) argued that the results of the 3D Checking Task research are applicable to compulsive checking behaviour seen in OCD. Using the same computer task with a group of 40 undergraduate students, the authors also asked the participants to report their agreement with a series of three statements that are associated with compulsive checkers. The authors reported increased endorsement of these statements in their sample as evidence of the similarity between the reduced memory confidence seen in the 3D Checking task, and that experienced by individuals with OCD. van den Hout and Kindt (2004) also reported a series of five experiments in which the counterproductive effect of repeated checking on memory confidence was further demonstrated. Across these five subtly different designs, the authors replicated the findings of their earlier two studies.

The original 3D stovetop experiment was replicated using an actual stovetop by Radomsky, Gilchrist, and Dussault (2006). In their adaptation of the original van den Hout and Kindt (2003a) paradigm, Radomsky et al. used an actual stovetop that was checked over repeated trials. In their sample of undergraduate students, the authors were able to replicate the finding that repeated checking of the stovetop led to reductions in memory vividness, detail and confidence. Coles, Radomsky, and Horng (2006) also replicated earlier findings that repeatedly checking a real stovetop would lead to reductions in memory confidence. Furthermore, these researchers established that as little as ten checking trials are required to observe deterioration in memory confidence.

It is worth noting that van den Hout and Kindt (2003a) and Radomsky et al. (2006) highlight that the decline in memory confidence observed with repeated checking is a normal phenomenon, observed in undergraduate student samples. There is yet to be an application of the stovetop checking methodology to individuals with clinical OCD symptoms. As such, it remains unclear whether individuals with OCD experience a more significant deterioration in memory confidence with repeated trials. It is also unclear whether deterioration in memory confidence seen in clinical participants occurs after a smaller number of checks than in non-clinical individuals. The use of only pre- and post-test measures in both of these studies also does not allow for evaluation of how many checks are required before memory confidence begins to deteriorate. Furthermore, it is not known what impact a condition of high/low perceived responsibility would have on the rate at which memory confidence deteriorated.

Personal responsibility cognitions have also been strongly implicated in recurrent checking behaviour seen in OCD. In his seminal cognitive conceptualisation of OCD, Salkovskis (1985) outlined a series of five cognitions that were suggested to be associated with the disorder. The common element across all of these cognitions is the inflation in personal responsibility for negative outcomes to oneself or others. Ideas about personal responsibility have been found to be strong predictors of checking behaviour. Perceived responsibility has been shown to directly predict an individual's discomfort as well as urge to check (Lopatka

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