



The characteristics of involuntary and voluntary autobiographical memories in depressed and never depressed individuals

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ABSTRACT

This study compares involuntary and voluntary autobiographical memories in depressed and never depressed individuals. Twenty depressed and twenty never depressed individuals completed a memory diary; recording their reactions to 10 involuntary and 10 voluntary memories over 14–30 days. Psychiatric status (Structured Clinical Interview for DSM-IV, SCID-1), psychopathology, rumination and avoidance were assessed. For both groups, involuntary memories more frequently lead to strong reactions than voluntarily memories. For both modes of retrieval, depressed individuals reported more frequent negative reactions than never depressed individuals and rated memories as more central to identity with higher levels of rumination and avoidance. Depressed individuals retrieved both positive and negative memories during involuntary retrieval. These findings support the view that involuntary memory retrieval represents a basic mode of retrieval during healthy and disordered cognition, and that during depression, both involuntary and voluntary memories are central to identity and associated with rumination and avoidance.

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1. Introduction

“I mainly remember how I felt. It was after my art exam, me and some friends were hanging out in the square at school. The sky was beautiful, the air was perfectly warm. I remember how comfortable I was, I felt happy”

An example of a rarely studied positive involuntary memory of a 19 year-old male with severe depression.

Involuntary autobiographical memories are memories for personal events that come to mind spontaneously, that is without any preceding attempts at memory retrieval (Beck, Steer, & Brown, 1996). Empirical investigations into the role of such autobiographical memories in psychological disorders have been of clinical interest for over 40 years (Horowitz, 1971). Within a clinical context, research has mainly focused on spontaneous memories which occur following highly negative or stressful events and are commonly referred to as intrusive memories. However a separate literature has identified that in the general population spontaneously arising memories not only occur following negative or stressful events but also following positive and even benign everyday events and represent a basic form of memory processing (Berntsen, 2009, 2010). These types of everyday spontaneous memories are commonly referred to as involuntary memories and have received relatively little attention in individuals experiencing psychopathology. Furthermore, no studies have directly compared these involuntary memories to autobiographical memories retrieved voluntarily in depressed populations. The general aims of the

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present study are to consider the characteristics associated with intrusive memories within the context of other forms of autobiographical memory retrieval and, to directly compare the characteristics of involuntary and voluntary autobiographical memories in depressed and never depressed individuals.

1.1. *Intrusive autobiographical memories during depression*

The first study to investigate intrusive memories during depression was conducted by *Kuyken and Brewin (1994)*. They interviewed 34 depressed females about their experience of physical and/or sexual abuse before the age of 17 and using the impact of events scale (IES, *Horowitz, Wilner, & Alvarez, 1979*) they identified that such traumatic memories are highly intrusive and frequently avoided in females with major depression. Since this study, investigations into spontaneous memories during depression have remained focused on repeated memories of negative events. *Brewin, Hunter, Carroll, and Tata (1996)* found that spontaneous memories were not limited to traumatic childhood events but occur following a variety of negative events including illness/death, work/finance problems, relationships/family problems and abuse/assault.

More recently, studies investigating the relationship between intrusive memories and psychopathology have moved away from using the life-event interview (*Brewin, Reynolds, & Tata, 1999*) and instead ask about any spontaneous memory which has come to mind recently (see *Williams & Moulds, 2011* for a review). Such studies have identified that distress following spontaneous memory retrieval is associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms and high levels of rumination and cognitive avoidance in undergraduate populations (*Starr & Moulds, 2006; Williams & Moulds, 2007*) and that depressed individuals experience higher levels of avoidance and higher levels of negative emotions following intrusive memories than never depressed individuals (*Newby & Moulds, 2011*). These findings are of significant clinical relevance however, the focus on repetitive negative or distressing events in these studies is still evident. Firstly, examples of negative but not positive spontaneous memories are provided in the instructions to participants. Second, analyses of the spontaneous memories are restricted to memories of negative life events (*Newby & Moulds, 2011; Starr & Moulds, 2006*). Third, voluntary (strategically retrieved) memories are not included for comparison. Due to the methodological focus on negative life-events in studies of intrusive memory retrieval during depression, it remains unclear whether these strong reactions (i.e. negative emotions, rumination and avoidance) in depression are limited to the spontaneous retrieval of negative and stressful events or, if the heightened physical and emotional reactions individuals experience during depression are also associated with other forms of autobiographical memory retrieval.

A second body of research has investigated voluntary autobiographical memory retrieval during low mood and depression. These studies have repeatedly shown that depressed individuals access memories of emotionally negative events more easily (*Clark & Teasdale, 1982; Fogarty & Hemsley, 1983; Lloyd & Lishman, 1975*) and report fewer memories of specific events than never depressed individuals (see *Williams et al., 2007* for a review). It is well documented that depressed individuals show a general bias towards negative information and employ cognitive strategies such as rumination and avoidance across a broad variety of psychological domains (*Ottenbreit & Dobson, 2004; Watkins, 2008*). Therefore in relation to memory retrieval, one important question is whether the bias towards negative information and high levels of rumination and avoidance seen during depression are present to the same degree during both involuntary and voluntary retrieval. A number of theoretical models have considered the relationship between intrusive memories and memories retrieved voluntarily during depression (The CaR-FA-X model, *Williams et al., 2007*; The Self-Memory System; *Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000*) however, no studies have directly compared the characteristics of memories which come to mind spontaneously and those memories retrieved voluntarily during depression.

1.2. *Involuntary memory retrieval in the general population*

Berntsen (2009, 2010) introduced the view that involuntary autobiographical memories are a basic mode of remembering, which is normally functional for our well-being but may have dysfunctional side-effects in terms of intrusive involuntary memories in emotional disorders such as depression and PTSD. She based her claims on studies showing that involuntary autobiographical memories are common in daily life, at least as common as voluntary autobiographical memories (*Berntsen, 1996; Rasmussen & Berntsen, 2011; Rubin, Boals, & Berntsen, 2008*) and that they most frequently refer to positive rather than negative events as is the case for autobiographical memory in general. *Walker, Skowronski, and Thompson (2003)* identified that on average, 60% of autobiographical memories retrieved are positive in nature, 25% are negative and 15% neutral. *Berntsen (1998)* demonstrated that this bias towards positive memories exists during both involuntary and voluntary retrieval. These findings lead researchers to argue against the long held assumption which has influenced studies of intrusive memories; that spontaneous memories occur as a stress response following negative or stressful events (*Brewin, Gregory, Lipton, & Burgess, 2010; Horowitz, 1975*). Instead, involuntary autobiographical memories form a basic mode of remembering which is employed frequently during everyday life following a variety of emotional and non-emotional events (*Berntsen, 2009; Berntsen, 2010*).

According to *Berntsen's (2009, 2010)* theory of involuntary memories as a basic mode of remembering both voluntary and involuntary remembering operate on the same underlying episodic memory system. This means that the two modes of remembering typically are similarly affected by factors present at encoding, e.g., both are enhanced by emotion, but involve different retrieval strategies – that is, an associative and context-dependent involuntary retrieval strategy versus a strategic and goal-directed voluntary strategy.

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