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Reduced specificity of negative autobiographical memories in repressive coping

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ABSTRACT

The current study examined memory specificity of autobiographical memories in individuals with and without a repressive coping style. It seems conceivable that reduced memory specificity may be a way to reduce accessibility of negative experiences, one of the hallmark features of a repressive coping style. It was therefore hypothesized that repressors would show reduced specificity when retrieving negative memories. In order to study memory specificity, participants ($N = 103$) performed the autobiographical memory test. Results showed that individuals with a repressive coping style were significantly less specific in retrieving negative experiences, relative to control groups of low anxious, high anxious, and defensive high anxious individuals. This result was restricted to negative memory retrieval, as participants did not differ in memory specificity for positive experiences. These results show that repressors retrieve negative autobiographical memories in an overgeneral way, possibly in order to avoid negative affect.

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1. Introduction

People are constantly confronted with emotions, which makes it vital for them to find good ways for dealing with these emotions and how to regulate them. As it turns out, individuals can control nearly each aspect of emotional processing, including how emotion directs their attention, the cognitive appraisals that form an emotional experience, the physiological result of their emotions, as well as how they remember emotional events throughout their lifetime (Gross, 2007; Koole, 2009). People obviously differ in how well they are able to regulate their emotions. Individuals with a repressive coping style seem a special case, as they appear to be very good at regulating their emotions. That is, so-called *repressors* are able to engage in a variety of self-deceptive manoeuvres to avoid awareness of threat and negative affect (see Myers, 2010, for a review). For instance, when faced with threatening information, repressors may increase their attention to positive information (Boden & Baumeister, 1997). Accordingly, they show lower levels of self-reported distress following self-threatening or stressful events. Interestingly, repressors' memory for negative events seems to be impaired as well. In several experiments, it was found that repressors recall fewer negative childhood memories compared to control participants (Myers & Brewin, 1994) and show a greater tendency to recall fewer negative than positive experiences (Newman & Hedberg, 1999). Moreover, in the laboratory they seem to be especially skilled in suppressing negative materials (Barnier,

Levin, & Maher, 2004; Geraerts, Merckelbach, Jelicic, & Smeets, 2006; Hertel & McDaniel, 2010; Overwijk, Wessel, & de Jong, 2009).

At first sight, this coping style might seem useful as it reduces everyday emotional distress. Yet, many long-term outcomes linked to repressive coping are negative, which is manifested in several ways. First, repressors possess less insight into their own emotional states (Barger, Kircher, & Croyle, 1997). Second, repressors' difficulty remembering negative events may be associated with costs as the past often serves as a guide for action in the present and future, affecting their adjustment (Davis, 1990). Third, their enhanced suppression of negative autobiographical events can lead to long-term increases in negative intrusions (Geraerts et al., 2006). Finally, and probably most importantly, repressive coping is associated with adverse health outcomes, such as heightened susceptibility to infectious disease, inhibited immune function, and increased risk for coronary heart disease, cancer, and asthma (see Myers, 2010 for a review). Indeed, the notion that psychological factors, in particular personality characteristics, contribute to the development of cancer has been proposed by a number of scientists over the past 30 years (e.g., Greer, Morris, & Pettingale, 1979). Little is known, however, about psychological conditions that may be related to repressive coping.

Overall, repression can best be considered as a trait, reflecting a habitual style of coping with aversive events. One of the most influential approaches to study repression as a trait was introduced by Weinberger, Schwartz, and Davidson (1979).

These authors distinguish between repressors (low anxiety, high defensiveness), low anxious (low anxiety, low defensiveness), high anxious (high anxiety, low defensiveness), and

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defensive high anxious (high anxiety, high defensiveness) people (see Fig. 1). These four subgroups are commonly defined by using a combination of anxiety and defensiveness self-reports. Mostly, the Marlow–Crowne Social Desirability Scale (MC; Crowne & Marlowe, 1960) is used as an index of defensiveness while the Taylor Manifest Anxiety Scale (TMAS; Bendig, 1956) is often used for measuring anxiety.

Defensiveness is the core construct of this taxonomy and has been defined in terms of habitually avoiding threatening material and minimizing negative affect (for a review, see Weinberger, 1990). Accordingly, people scoring high on defensiveness tend to bias their self-evaluations in a positive direction. Most studies that adopted Weinberger's taxonomy confirmed that repressors who are confronted with stressful situations report lower anxiety levels than their behavioral or physiological reactions suggest. In Weinberger's words (1990, p. 338), "Repressors are people who fail to recognize their own affective responses.... Repressors as a group seem actively engaged in keeping themselves, rather than just other people, convinced that they are not prone to negative affect."

Clearly, cognitive avoidance may not be "the way to go". In another line of research, Williams et al., noticed that traumatized individuals regulate their negative affect by recalling autobiographical events in a less specific way (e.g., without any details) to protect themselves from emotional distress related to their traumatic memories. This relative inability to recall specific autobiographical memories has been termed overgeneral memory (Williams & Broadbent, 1986). At first this overgeneral retrieval strategy may be restricted to the traumatic memory, but later on generalizes to the entire (negative) autobiographical memory base, resulting in reduced memory specificity (Williams et al., 2007; Williams, Stiles, & Shapiro, 1999).

At present, many studies have confirmed the link between reduced specificity and trauma, indicating its function of cognitive avoidance. Findings of reduced memory specificity range from childhood abuse (Hauer, Wessel, Geraerts, Merckelbach, & Dalgleish, 2008) to combat (McNally, Lasko, Macklin, & Pitman, 1995). Moreover, Hermans, Defranc, Williams, Raes, and Eelen (2005) found that memory specificity correlates with several measures of avoidant coping. Other evidence for its role of cognitive avoidance comes from experimental work. Raes, Hermans, De Decker, Williams, and Eelen (2003) compared individuals displaying a lack of memory specificity with individuals who were highly specific in their autobiographical

memory recall. They found that an experimental stress manipulation was significantly less distressing in low-specific individuals. Related work from their lab has confirmed that people with a less specific retrieval style are also less emotionally aroused by a negative personal experience (Raes, Hermans, Williams, & Eelen, 2006).

The whole of these findings strongly suggests that reduced memory specificity can act as a way to reduce the accessibility of negative experiences. This avoidant memory style might have beneficial effects in the short run (less emotional impact of stressful events) but may be detrimental in the long run. The link with repressive coping becomes especially apparent: It may well be the case that reduced memory specificity is a way for repressors to avoid negative affect. Indeed, a few studies indicate that there is a correlation between reduced memory specificity and repressive coping or repressive defensiveness (Dickson, Moberly, Hannon, & Bates, 2009; Raes et al., 2006). Yet, these studies did not select their participants on the basis of Weinberger's fourfold classification so no comparison was possible between the different groups. Therefore, the current study was conducted to examine whether people with a repressive coping style would show reduced specificity of negative autobiographical memories, relative to the other three (control) groups, and relative to positive autobiographical memories.

Also, by now a large series of studies has demonstrated positive correlations between overgeneral memory, intrusions and effort to avoid memories of traumatic events (e.g., Hauer, Wessel, & Merckelbach, 2006; Kuyken & Brewin, 1995; Schönfeld, Ehlers, Böllinghaus, & Rief, 2007; Stokes, Dritschel, & Bekerian, 2004; Wessel, Merckelbach, & Dekkers, 2002). Williams (2006) suggested that having intrusions and/or effortful avoidance of memories about an earlier trauma might contribute to overgeneral memory as they reduce the available executive resources to seek specific memories. Likewise, he suggested that a traumatic experience may cause people to have overgeneral memories through avoidance of (negative) specific memories. This is again consistent with the idea that recall of fewer specific memories may be a way to avoid negative affect. Recent research has started to examine which mechanisms may underlie the finding that overgeneral memory and (trauma-related) intrusions are connected. As intrusive thoughts and memories are common in the aftermath of a traumatic experience, most trauma survivors habitually employ avoidance of anything related to the trauma. Indeed, the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) include not talking about the trauma, avoiding reminders of the trauma, and social withdrawal (APA, 2000). Attempts to avoid traumatic memories in order to reduce the negative affect accompanying these intrusions may also result in overgeneral recall of other non-trauma related autobiographical memories. Schönfeld et al. (2007) found that when traumatized individuals actively suppressed trauma-related thoughts during the autobiographical memory test (AMT), they were more overgeneral than subjects who did not actively suppress their trauma-related thoughts. This effect was especially pronounced in individuals with PTSD. Schönfeld et al. (2007) suggested that a so-called misguided suppression effect might be in play in PTSD patients. Intentional suppression of a traumatic memory may impede emotional processing and integration of the traumatic memory, might make the memory more available and potentially might even increase inhibition of memory formation itself. This may lead to a vicious circle between intrusive memories, thought suppression, overgeneral memory and a deficient integration of the traumatic memory. Avoidance may be responsible for the finding that intrusions and reduced memory specificity are linked.

Therefore, the current study also examined parameters of reported intrusions and avoidance to inspect the link with reduced memory specificity and repressive coping. Previous research namely has shown that repressive copers are skilled at suppressing

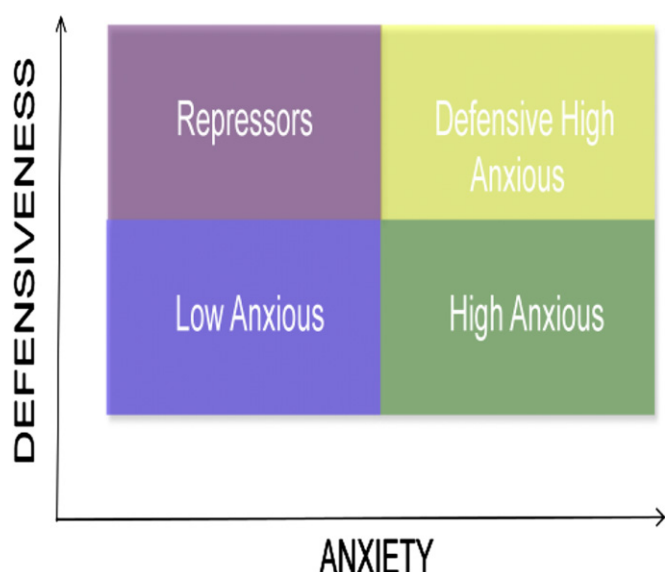


Fig. 1. Fourfold classification introduced by Weinberger et al. (1979).

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