



The self and involuntary memory: Identifying with the victim increases memory accessibility for stressful events



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 December 2012

Available online 8 September 2013

Keywords:

The self
Involuntary memory
Emotion regulation
PTSD

ABSTRACT

Autobiographical memory is intimately linked to the self. However, the relation between the self and involuntary recall has been understudied. Theoretically, the more relevant an event is to the self the more accessible the memory should be. In line with this prediction, the present study tested the hypothesis that self-relevance of a stressor modulates involuntary recall. Healthy student participants viewed distressing film clips and were presented with information that defined the main characters as more or less similar to them, or without any information about the characters. In line with predictions, participants in the high self-relevance condition reported more involuntary memories of the film clips after one week compared to participants in the low self-relevance and control conditions. The findings support the theoretical relation between the self and memory accessibility and extend findings from previous research to the domain of involuntary recall.

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1. Introduction

The Self-Memory System model of autobiographical memory (SMS; Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000) proposes that events that are highly threatening to the self, such as a traumatic event, result in highly accessible memories. These memories may become accessible to the point where they are recalled involuntarily such as traumatic flashbacks. These involuntary memories may function to fuel action directed at minimizing the threat to the self (Conway, 2005; Conway, Meares, & Standart, 2004). Although the importance of autobiographical memory for our sense of self is broadly accepted much less is known about the role of the self in memory accessibility. The current study experimentally tested the hypothesis that involuntary recall of a stressor depends on the extent to which the stressor is perceived as relevant to the self. To the extent that this perceived threat can be viewed as an appraisal of the traumatic event and/or its impact this hypothesis would also be in line with the cognitive model of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Ehlers & Clark, 2000). The cognitive model identifies negative appraisals of the trauma as a key mechanism in the development and maintenance of PTSD symptoms, including involuntary memories.

The idea that a stimulus becomes a stressor if it poses a threat to the self has been evident for some time in the emotion regulation literature. In 1964, Speisman and colleagues (Speisman, Lazarus, Mordkoff, & Davison) wrote: “a stimulus must be regarded by the person as a threat to his welfare in order for stress responses to be produced. Thus, the same stimulus may be either a stressor or not, depending upon the nature of the cognitive appraisal the person makes regarding the significance for him.” (pp. 367). This proposition has been validated since by a series of classic studies in the emotion literature (Gross, 1998; Lazarus & Alfert, 1964; Speisman, Lazarus, Mordkoff, & Davison, 1964).

Empirical evidence for the relation between memory accessibility and the self is also emerging from the clinical literature. Sutherland and Bryant (2005) asked individuals with PTSD and trauma-exposed individuals without PTSD to

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provide memories that showed who they are as a person (self-defining memories). Respondents with PTSD retrieved more trauma-related memories than trauma-exposed respondents without PTSD. The same pattern emerged in another sample when participants were asked to recall memories in response to positive and negative word cues (Sutherland & Bryant, 2008).

Although these studies underline the importance of the link between the self and memory the conclusions are limited to voluntary recall. Initial support for the relation between the self and involuntary recall comes from two studies. In a study by Pearson (2012) participants were shown a distressing film clip and afterwards rated the self-relevance of the film clip on a single visual analogue scale (VAS). Participants reported their involuntary memories of the film in a one-week diary. In line with the rationale of the present study, the self-relevance rating was significantly and positively correlated with the overall number of involuntary memories of the film reported by the participants. This finding provides initial support for the idea that self-relevance is related to involuntary recall although no causal inferences can be made based on this correlation. One study experimentally investigated the causal effect of self-efficacy on involuntary memory development (Brown, Joscelyne, Dorfman, Marmar, & Bryant, 2012). Student participants were led to believe that, based on a questionnaire score, they were either very capable (high self-efficacious) or not very capable (low self-efficacious) of coping with distressing events. They were then presented with a distressing film showing the aftermath of road traffic accidents. Participants in the high self-efficacy condition reported fewer intrusions of a negative film clip immediately after the film and 24 h later compared to participants in the low self-efficacy condition. The findings are in line with the hypothesis that the self-image (in this case, perceived ability to cope with the stressor) influences involuntary recall. However, this study did not directly manipulate self-relevance and did not measure involuntary recall over a period longer than 24 h.

The main aim of the present study was to experimentally test the role of perceived relevance to the self in the involuntary recall of a laboratory stressor. Several distressing film clips were used to induce involuntary memories (see Krans, Näring, Becker, & Holmes, 2009, for a review of studies using this paradigm). Relevance to the self was established by varying the extent to which student participants could identify with the main characters in the film clips based on their social roles and self-descriptions. Accordingly, one third of participants (high self-relevance condition) viewed the film clips after receiving information that defined the main character as being very similar to them in terms of social role (e.g., a student). In contrast, one third of the participants (low self-relevance condition) viewed the exact same film clips but received information that the main characters were very different from them (e.g., a businessperson in their 40's). Finally, one third of participants viewed the film clips without any context information in the control condition. Participants reported their involuntary memories of the film in a one-week diary and then returned for follow-up.

Based on the Self-Memory System model (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000) and the empirical studies as reviewed above (Brown et al., 2012; Pearson, 2012; Sutherland & Bryant, 2005, 2008), it was predicted that participants in the high self-relevance condition would report a higher frequency of involuntary memories than those in the low self-relevance and control conditions. No specific difference was expected between the low self-relevance and control condition.

2. Method

This study was approved by the ethical committee of the Behavioural Science Institute of the Radboud University Nijmegen where the data was collected.

2.1. Participants

Participants were students who received course credit for participation. Study information included the use of distressing film clips and information about the exclusion criteria. For ethical reasons, participants were pre-screened for the following exclusion criteria: post-traumatic stress disorder (lifetime or current), major depressive episode (lifetime or current), psychotic episode (lifetime or current), panic attacks or panic disorder (current), current intoxication, history of fainting, and blood phobia. In total, 54 participants participated in the study.

2.2. Materials

2.2.1. Film clips

Four film clips were selected based on their potential to allow for a low and high identification with the main character by the student participants. The film clips were presented after a written vignette that provided information about the main character in the film clip. In the control condition no information was provided but a blank screen appeared for the same duration instead. The context vignettes were identical in the high and low self-relevance condition except for key words indicating the level of self-relevance (e.g., student vs. business person).

The first clip was a section of a training film for firemen (Steil, 1996). It shows a woman screaming while she receives medical attention in an ambulance. Participants in the high self-relevance condition were told she was a student whereas in the low self-relevance condition participants were told she was a secretary. The second film clip was a selection from the short film 'The Big Shave' by Martin Scorsese (1967). The clip shows a man cutting himself severely while shaving. Participants in the high self-relevance condition were told that this was a student whereas participants in the low self-relevance condition were told that this was an actor. The third film clip was a selection of the film 'Fahrenheit 911' by

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