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THE EFFECTS OF MENTAL FOCUS ON PRESENT AFFECT AND ATTRIBUTIONS
OF PERSONAL MEANING FOR VALENCED AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL EVENTS

By

Chantal M. Boucher

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
through Psychology
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts at the
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

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The Effects of Mental Focus on Present Affect and Attributions of Personal Meaning for
Valenced Autobiographical Events

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September 9, 2015

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated how focusing on the concrete details (*experience focus*) versus broader life significance (*coherence focus*) of valenced transitions influences appraisals of event impact, self-relevance, and present affect. Participants selected a past event characterized by positive versus negative personal change and rated aspects of emotion during recall (valence, intensity, and reference point). They described the event using an experience or coherence focus and provided ratings on affect, impact, self-relevance, and memory characteristics. Cognitive emotion regulation and preference for abstraction were explored. A coherence (vs. experience) focus produced ratings of lower negative affect and higher psychological impact and self-change for negative, but not positive, events. The negative-coherence group shifted the most toward positive emotion. Positive (vs. negative) events incited appraisals of greater positive affect, material impact, centrality/importance, self-blame, and lower need for acceptance. A coherence focus is thought to facilitate adaptive self-reflection via the reconciliation of personally salient negative transitions.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my loving husband, Fady Yousif. I am forever grateful for his unwavering support, encouragement, and willingness to oblige my love for long walks and deliberations about the complexities of the human mind.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I extend my sincerest gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Alan Scoboria, for his invaluable guidance, wisdom, and support leading up to this point. He encouraged me to step on a path that I had not known I could walk - an academic transition that profoundly altered my extended self-view - and for this, I am eternally grateful. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Kimberly Calderwood and Dr. Kathryn Lafreniere, for their constructive and insightful comments, and particularly, for inspiring a broader view of potential applications and future directions. I would like to acknowledge my research assistants, Sarah Glazewski and Nadeen Shaabana, for their reliability and diligence in study administration, along with my fellow lab members for their helpful feedback and support at all stages of this project. I am especially grateful to those who participated in this study and offered to share their personally significant experiences; these fascinating narratives reminded me of why I love this field and this research area so much. I must also recognize the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for supporting this work. Finally, my warmest appreciation goes to my family members for their unconditional love, understanding, and encouragement in all that I aspire to achieve; special thanks goes to my cats, for the opportune times they decide to lie on my laptop and cajole me into snuggle breaks.

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NOMENCLATURE

Mental focus: The two levels of mental construal emphasizing different elements of personal experiences upon retrieval: the concrete details (experience focus) versus broader life significance (coherence focus; Libby & Eibach, 2009, 2011a).

Experience focus: A focus on what it was like to experience an event directly as if one is actually there again, noting specific sensorial and contextual details (e.g., the location, specific actions, sights, sounds, smells, objects involved; Libby & Eibach, 2009, 2011a).

Coherence focus: A focus on the broader significance of an event, noting how it relates to personal characteristics and other life events (e.g., previous experiences, accomplishments, relationships, the future, one's life as a whole and self as a person; Libby & Eibach, 2009, 2011a).

Valence: In psychology, the quality of emotions, objects, or events characterizing their attractiveness (positive valence) or aversiveness (negative valence; <http://psychologydictionary.org/>).

Adaptive: In psychology, the ability to adjust and function well in response to changes in cognitions, emotions, and/or social environment. Such responses are productive for the individual and are associated with psychological health (<http://psychologydictionary.org/>).

Maladaptive: In psychology, the inability to adjust and function well in response to changes in cognitions, emotions, and/or social environment. Such responses are counterproductive to the individual and are associated with psychological dysfunction (<http://psychologydictionary.org/>).

Reference point for evoked emotion: The relative source of current emotion during recall of a past event: emotional reactions may derive mostly from thinking about what it was like to experience the event directly (experience referent) or from thinking about the broader consequences of the event to oneself and one's life (consequences referent; Libby & Eibach, 2011b).

INTRODUCTION

It has long been recognized that memory is a partially reconstructive rather than wholly reproductive affair (Bartlett, 1932). Mental representations of personal past events, or *autobiographical memories*, are not static in the minds of those who experience them; rather, they are frequently composed of elements drawn from various sources, episodes, and prior general knowledge, often without conscious awareness. The meaning attributed to personal events is also not fixed. Each time one calls to mind a past experience, even those considered to be self-defining, there is opportunity for the development of new meaning. For instance, appraisals of the impact and self-relevance of past transitional events - events that produce marked change in the way people perceive themselves, live their lives, and understand the world (Brown & Lee, 2010) - can be actively manipulated at the time of retrieval (Boucher & Scoboria, 2015).

Autobiographical memories can also arouse emotions in the present, emotions similar in type and intensity to the original experience (Schwartz, Weinberger, & Singer, 1981). For example, recalling the death of a loved one may re-invoke feelings of sadness, whereas recalling a major achievement may conjure feelings of exhilaration and pride. Furthermore, some aspects of the event, upon reflection, may be more emotionally evocative than others. For instance, emotions may primarily derive from thinking about what it was like to experience the event directly (e.g., recalling the specific thoughts, feelings, location, and surroundings when becoming aware of a loved one's death), or from thinking about the broader consequences of the event (e.g., how the loss of this significant other has altered notions of oneself as a person, how it relates to other life events, and how it informs the future; Libby & Eibach, 2011b). However, irrespective of

this *reference point for evoked emotion* (I will return to this idea in subsequent sections), the ability to regulate memory-induced emotions is intricately tied to the construction of meaning (Cox & McAdams, 2014; Kross & Ayduk, 2011). Perhaps then, the *ways* in which people go about reflecting upon prior episodes can also influence present affect at the time of retrieval.

Indeed, research from personality, developmental, social, and cognitive psychology converges on the idea that the strategies people use to (re)construct their personal pasts can inform current psychological functioning (e.g., Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; McAdams, 2001). For instance, certain *cognitive strategies* have been shown to influence present well-being for better (Zhou, Sedikides, Wildschut, & Gao, 2008) or worse (Reynolds & Brewin, 1999), judgments about the self and others, decisions about future goals (Libby & Eibach, 2011b), appraisals of the significance of past events to one's identity and life-story (McAdams, 2001), judgments of closure (Crawley, 2010), and perceptions of how one responds to emotions once they emerge (Cox & McAdams, 2014).

In subsequent sections, I introduce two distinct cognitive strategies for autobiographical event representation, namely *mental focus* and *imagery perspective*, discuss how they relate to each other and to other conceptually similar constructs reported in the literature along with how they may inform facets of self-knowledge. I then review discrepancies in the literature concerning motives underlying these strategies, in addition to disagreements regarding their implications for emotion and meaning making. Designed to elucidate these discrepancies, the proposed study investigates whether and how focusing on the concrete details (*experience focus*) versus broader life significance

(*coherence focus*) of emotionally valenced transitional events can inform individuals' present affect and attributions of event impact and self-relevance.

Cognitive Strategies for Representing Autobiographical Events

Mental focus. One factor known to influence the attribution of meaning to events is the mental focus people use when thinking about them (Libby & Eibach, 2009, 2011a). An *experience focus* entails retrieving and describing what it is like to experience an event directly as if one is actually there, noting specific sensorial and contextual elements (e.g., where the event took place, who was involved, what actions were performed, and what was seen, heard, and smelled). Conversely, a *coherence focus* involves retrieving and describing the implications of an event within the context of one's life as a whole, remarking on how it relates to personal characteristics and other life events (e.g., how the event relates to previous accomplishments, relationships, and the future; McAdams, 2001; Pillemer, 1998; Vallacher & Wegner, 1985).

Though people spend relatively little time intentionally reflecting on themselves and other non-immediate events in the course of daily living (Csikszentmihalyi & Figurski, 1982), research suggests the inclination to take such a perspective can lead to beneficial outcomes. For instance, Vallacher and Wegner (1989) found that individuals who were more inclined to construe actions abstractly tended to be less impulsive, had stronger internal loci of control, and were more certain of their self-concepts. Further, Cox and McAdams (2014) provide evidence that deriving positive abstract meaning from highly valenced, identity-rich memories (i.e., high and low point life episodes) can promote adaptive cognitive emotion regulation strategies.

Imagery perspective. Another cognitive strategy for autobiographical event

representation concerns the perspective used to envision events. People may visualize an event using a *first-person perspective* in which they mentally “see” the event as if from their own eyes, or they may visualize the event using a *third-person perspective*, in which they adopt the vantage point of an observer to envision themselves as well as their surroundings (Nigro & Neisser, 1983). Comment on this phenomenon originates early in psychology’s history (e.g., Freud, 1907/1960; Galton, 1883; Henri & Henri, 1897).

Since this time, research has shown that, without explicit prompts to adopt a particular perspective, individuals may experience images from each vantage point during recall (Huebner & Frederickson, 1999), and for positive and negative memories, they generally report greater first-person imagery (D’Argembeau, Comblain, & Van der Linden, 2003). Moreover, memories recalled from an observer’s (third-person) visual perspective tend to be associated with less emotional arousal compared to those recalled from a field (first-person) perspective (e.g., Berntsen & Rubin, 2006; Robinson & Swanson, 1993; Sutin & Robins, 2008). Examining the effects of a similar psychological mechanism termed *self-distancing*, which encompasses slightly more than visual imagery alone, Ayduk and Kross (2010) found that adaptive reconciliation of negative past events (via reductions in distress and rumination) resulted from a more distanced (third-person), as compared to immersed (first-person) view of the self and one’s recalled experience (however, see Libby, Valenti, Pfent, & Eibach, 2011; Marigold, Eibach, Libby, Holmes, & Ross, 2011, for evidence to the contrary).

Expanding our understanding of the use of various cognitive strategies, therefore, has the potential to further inform adaptive human functioning in terms of healthy meaning making and regulation of memory-induced emotions. I begin with an essential

component of autobiographical remembering (Conway, 2005; Wilson & Ross, 2003), one through which these cognitive strategies are proposed to operate: the self.

Mental Focus, Imagery Perspective, and the Self

Libby and Eibach (2011a) suggest the two levels of mental focus outlined above are intricately related to the two facets of the self proposed by William James' (1890/1950): the "I", or *experiential self* (self as subject of thought) - the experience of the self as engaging with immediate surroundings (Legrand & Ruby, 2009), and the "me", or *conceptual self* (self as object of thought) - a general self-awareness that includes theories of personality, values, life themes, and goals (Conway, 2005; McAdams, 2001). Essentially then, focusing on the concrete details of events, an *experience focus*, forms the basis for the experiential self, whereas focusing on events in terms of their broader life significance, a *coherence focus*, forms the basis for the conceptual self (Libby & Eibach, 2011a).

Imagery perspective is thought to serve a similar role in self-construction through its close relationship with mental focus. Libby and Eibach (2009, 2011b) suggest that shifts in imagery perspective correspond to an understanding of events from the bottom-up, in terms of the phenomenology evoked by concrete features of the pictured event (first-person), or from the top-down, in terms of abstractions that integrate the pictured event within a broader context (third-person). More abstract cognitive strategies (i.e., third-person imagery, coherence focus) are therefore thought to function in adaptive self-reflection by providing the cognitive means with which to integrate events within a generalized framework of personal themes, thereby informing notions of how the self evolves across time (Conway, 2005; McAdams, 2001).

One's currently operating self-theory can also inform the mental focus and imagery perspective used at retrieval. For instance, Libby and Eibach (2011a) found that a theory of oneself as having changed versus remaining stable over time predicted imagery perspective irrespective of event valence: self-stability was associated with first-person imagery whereas self-change was associated with third-person imagery. Further, individuals' self-reports of focusing more on analyzing the event (coherence focus), compared to experiencing it (experience focus), accounted for changed individuals' greater use of third-person imagery.

Libby and Eibach (2011a) take this as support for the view that third-person imagery is determined by a motive to achieve a coherent self-understanding across time (*self-coherence motive*; McAdams, 1997; Vinitzky-Seroussi, 1998) rather than a motive to disown events that reflect poorly on the present self (*self-enhancement motive*; Leary, 2007; Sanitioso, 2008; Sedikides & Gregg, 2003). Therefore, when all else is equal, people should use third-person imagery when recalling an event that is inconsistent (vs. consistent) with their present self-concept, and this effect should not depend on whether participants perceive change for the better or change for the worse, but rather on whether they focus on the event's broader significance (third-person) or on its concrete features (first-person). The relationship between imagery perspective and mental focus (third-person/coherence; first-person/experience) appears to be bidirectional; that is, manipulations of third-person imagery tend to exaggerate default assumptions of self-change by way of inducing a more reflective (i.e., coherence) focus (Libby, Eibach, & Gilovich, 2005). This research aptly lends itself to an examination of mental focus effects per se on other self-relevant phenomena, such as appraisals of personal meaning.

Mental Focus and Attributions of the Impact and Self-Relevance of Events

The current study centers on forms of meaning that include perceptions of the material and psychological changes resulting from an event (transitional impact), along with how central the event is perceived to be to one's identity and life-story (self-relevance). Although it has been suggested that self-defining memories, affording greater emotional arousal, are tagged with particular fixed meaning that is stored with the memory (Beike & Crone, 2012), Boucher and Scoboria (2015) provide divergent evidence. They found that the perceived impact and self-relevance of self-selected life transitions were indeed malleable depending on the mental focus (coherence vs. experience) incited during retrieval. Regardless of the emotional valence associated with events, those who employed a coherence focus appraised their event as being more impactful, more strongly connected to other life events, and more central to their identity. Interestingly, mental focus was found to influence appraisals of both psychological impact (change in attitudes, thoughts, emotions, sense of self, and moral understanding) and, to a lesser extent, material impact (change in places frequented, things owned, people associated with, and daily activities). Thus, even ostensibly "fixed" (material) aspects of key past experiences are subject to variation depending on how retrieval occurs.

Notably, whereas previous research suggests people reconcile perceptions of self-change by spontaneously adopting a broader reflective mindset in search of turning points to explain discrepancies (McAdams, Josselson, & Leiblich, 2001; Ross & McFarland, 1988), this study illustrates how the reverse also holds true: when thinking about events

characterized by change, adopting a coherence focus coincides with a stronger sense of change in self-concept and aspects of daily life.

Just as life transitions bisect relatively stable lifetime periods (Brown, Hansen, Lee, Vanderveen, & Conrad, 2012), and may serve as anchors for discriminating selves of different time periods, so too can negative/low-point and positive/high-point episodes. Such experiences are transitional in that they distinguish lifetime periods of reduced self-relevance and can be framed as part of a positive trajectory (change for the better) or negative trajectory (change for the worse) in one's life-story. Taken together, the preceding research suggests that mental focus should exert effects on perceived impact and self-relevance irrespective of event valence.

Imagery Perspective and Emotion

Whereas Boucher and Scoboria (2015) demonstrated mental focus effects on perceived impact and self-relevance for self-selected past transitions, there exists no research to date examining the influence of mental focus on present affect for explicitly valenced events. Imagery perspective, and variants thereof, have however been considered in relation to negative emotions (e.g., Kross, Gard, Deldin, Clifton, & Ayduk, 2012; Kross & Ayduk, 2010). Hypotheses concerning the effects of mental focus on present affect must therefore be gleaned via mental focus' close relationship with imagery perspective; that is, in light of evidence supporting the hypothesis that perspective functions to inform the level of meaning of events (Libby & Eibach, 2011b).

There are discrepancies in the literature concerning the effects of self-reflection on emotion, which Kross and Ayduk (2011) fittingly refer to as the "self-reflection paradox." On the one hand, reflecting on negative emotions can lead to important

physical and mental health benefits (e.g., Pennebaker, 1997; Wilson & Gilbert, 2008). However, efforts to understand negative emotions can also incite ruminative thinking, which can make people feel worse (e.g., Gruber, Eidelman, Johnson, Smith, & Harvey, 2011; Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco, & Lyubomirsky, 2008). Literature concerning relationships amongst mental focus, imagery perspective, and default assumptions about how recalled events relate to the self (i.e., currently operating self-theories; Libby & Eibach, 2011b) may therefore prove integral to elucidating the effects of concrete versus abstract event construals on present emotion, and explaining why people's attempts to make sense of negative feelings sometimes succeed and other times fail.

It has been suggested that third-person imagery functions to reduce envisioned events' power to elicit emotion via psychological self-distancing (e.g., Holmes & Mathews, 2010; Kenny et al., 2009); that is, by adopting a self-distanced (third-person) perspective rather than a self-immersed (first-person) perspective, the self that reasons about a past event becomes psychologically removed from the self that has experienced it. It is this "separation of self" (likened to Libby & Eibach's [2011a] notion of self-inconsistency) that allows one to reflect on the meaning (why) rather than the process (how) of that event, thereby diminishing associated emotion (Kross & Ayduk, 2011; Fujita, Henderson, Eng, Trope, & Liberman, 2006). Indeed, Ayduk and Kross (2010) found that using a self-distanced perspective to reflect on negative events reduced feelings of emotional distress, whereas adopting a self-immersed perspective had the reverse effect. Noteworthy, this model regards the self as it relates to recollected concrete experience. Thus, separation from self necessarily refers to separation from the Jamesian "I" (James, 1890/1950).

According to the alternative view, the self is dual-faceted, and the function of imagery perspective is determined not only by the separation of experiential self, but also by the integration of the conceptual self (Libby & Eibach, 2011b); that is, rather than causing people to adopt a detached, objective interpretation of an event, third-person imagery causes people to integrate it within a broader framework of general self-views, and their emotional reactions reflect the subjective meaning that results (e.g., Libby et al., 2011). As previously mentioned, thoughts about what it was like to experience an event versus its broader life consequences may be used to define the event's emotional significance (e.g., Gilovich & Medvec, 1995; Tangney & Dearing, 2002), and this *reference point for evoked emotion* is thought to moderate the effect of imagery perspective on emotion (Libby & Eibach, 2011b). For instance, if emotions primarily derive from thinking about the broader consequences of an event within one's life, then third-person imagery (and by extension, a coherence focus) should magnify whatever emotion is associated with his or her currently operating self-theory (e.g., change for the better/positive emotion vs. change for the worse/negative emotion). Adhering to this logic, picturing a past failure from the third-person, as opposed to the first-person, perspective was found to significantly increase feelings of shame for people with low self-esteem (event and associated emotion agrees with the self-theory), while significantly decreasing shame among people with high self-esteem (event and associated emotion disagrees with the self-theory; Libby et al., 2011).

It should follow then, that in order for a coherence focus to promote adaptive coping, an adaptive framework must also be specified (e.g., a theory of self-change vs. self-stability; positive change vs. negative change; concrete vs. abstract emotional

referent) to guide the meaning making and emotional reaction that occurs. These “default assumptions” or “self-theories” serve to explain the effects of self-distancing on the adaptive reconciliation of negatively charged events (e.g., Ayduk & Kross, 2010; Kross & Ayduk, 2009; Kross, Ayduk, & Mischel, 2005). In these studies, people were asked to “envision the distant you,” implying that the present self is somehow distinct from the past self in memory. The assumed self-theory then is, “this event does not reflect who I am” (self-change), and therefore third-person imagery serves to reduce associated negative emotion (distress). According to Libby and Eibach’s (2011b) model, without this self-distancing instruction, people might consider the negative past self as part of the present, in which case third-person imagery could produce damaging effects on present well-being (e.g., Libby et al., 2011; Libby, Schaeffer, Eibach, & Slemmer, 2007).

Notably, previous research concerning cognitive strategies and emotion focuses almost exclusively on negative emotions associated with significant negative events (e.g., Kross & Ayduk, 2011; Schartau, Dalgleish, & Dunn, 2009); for example, events characterized by “overwhelming sadness” (Kross et al., 2012, p. 562), “overwhelming anger and hostility” (Kross et al., 2005, p. 711), or “distress” (Schartau et al., 2009, p. 23). Certainly however, people’s autobiographical histories are composed of more than solely negative experiences necessitating emotion regulation in the present. And, akin to the subtle but important difference between experiential self-separation and conceptual self-integration, the attenuation of negative emotions can be distinguished from the preservation of positive emotions. Moreover, events deemed personally important appear to be granted preferential encoding and maintenance within autobiographical memory (Berntsen & Bohn, 2010; Pillemer, 1998; Robinson, 1992; Singer & Salovey, 1993)

making them equitably suited to both experience and coherence manipulations. Libby and Eibach's (2011b) model, then, provides a suitable platform from which to examine mental focus effects on significant positive and negative events characterized by personal change (improvement vs. decline); a compromise amongst various lines of research investigating self-distancing (Kross & Ayduk, 2011), imagery perspective (Libby & Eibach, 2011a), and mental focus (Boucher & Scoboria, 2015).

Just as life episodes and theories of self-change can be highly valenced, so too can emotion regulation efforts. Cox and McAdams (2014) found that positive meaning making of both high and low-point life episodes predicted positive emotion regulation strategies (refocusing, reappraisal, and putting into perspective), whereas negative meaning making of low-point life episodes predicted negative emotion regulation strategies (self-blame and rumination). Participants in this study were prompted to discuss the details of their events and then reflect on the broader implications, which can be likened to a shift in mental focus from experience to coherence. It is therefore unknown whether this mental focus shift, or a coherence focus alone, can account for the findings. In any case, Cox and McAdams (2014) further clarify the "self-reflection paradox" in suggesting that the form of event appraisal matters for adaptive versus maladaptive cognitive emotion regulation.

Taken together, the effects of mental focus on emotion for positive versus negative transitions should depend on whether the direction of understanding characterizing each focus (experience [bottom-up] vs. coherence [top-down]) agrees with one's currently operating self-theory, namely, the reference point for evoked emotion (experience of the event [bottom-up] vs. its consequences [top-down]), in which case a

coherence focus should magnify emotions associated with the event. To use negative transitions as an example, if current emotions primarily result from thinking about the broader consequences of the event in one's life, then a coherence focus should produce reports of greater associated (i.e., negative) affect, relative to an experience focus. Conversely, if emotions mainly derive from thinking about what it was like to experience the event, then a coherence focus should reveal lower associated (i.e., negative) affect, compared to an experience focus. Finally, the effects of a coherence focus on emotion regulation should depend on whether the meaning making that takes place is positive or negative.

Overview of the Present Study

Purpose. This study investigated whether and how instructing people to focus on the concrete details (*experience focus*) versus broader life-significance (*coherence focus*) of a self-selected negative versus positive transitional event influences present affect and perceptions of event impact and self-relevance. Ancillary aims were to explore adaptive and maladaptive cognitive emotion regulation strategies, preferences for abstraction, and select phenomenological aspects of remembering.

Implications. By controlling event valence and accounting for a proposed moderating variable (i.e., reference point for evoked emotion), this study is positioned to address discrepancies in the literature concerning motives to abstract (self-enhancement vs. self-coherence) and the outcomes of abstraction (adaptive vs. maladaptive). It also serves to extend previous findings concerning the effects of mental focus on appraisals of transitional events (Boucher & Scoboria, 2015) in the realm of controlled memory-invoked emotions. Doing so addresses the potential malleability of meaning attributions

and emotional reactions for significant valenced autobiographical events (e.g., Beike & Crone [2012] argue that self-defining events are fixed in their meaning, save for when emotional response is sufficiently low), which is particularly important given such appraisals can inform goal pursuit (Conway, Singer, & Tagini, 2004) and psychopathology (Sarp & Tosun, 2011).

In a clinical realm, this study speaks to how conceptually similar ‘self-distancing’ strategies, for example, in therapies for depression (Beck, 1970), borderline personality disorder (Linehan, 1993), and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Resick et al., 2008), independently contribute to the alleviation or exacerbation of distress. Though the benefits of self-distancing have been demonstrated in populations with clinical depression (Kross & Ayduk, 2010) and bipolar disorder (Gruber, Harvey, & Johnson, 2009), as I have reviewed, a distanced vantage point may not always serve to blunt emotional response (e.g., Marigold et al., 2011). Adhering to Libby and Eibach’s (2011b) model concerning third-person imagery, the effects of a coherence focus on adaptive versus maladaptive coping should depend on one’s currently operating self-theory in relation to the event being recalled. Therefore, if the event represents a positive turning point, a coherence focus should signal recovery. However, if the event represents a negative or even traumatic turning point, as in the case of PTSD (Berntsen & Rubin, 2007), a coherence focus could be detrimental.

In sum, this study is designed to provide insight into the ways in which mental foci may differentially inform present affect, attributions of event impact and self-relevance, along with cognitive emotion regulation strategies following the retrieval of significant positive versus negative transitional events. In so doing, it stands to resolve

theoretical and empirical discrepancies in the literature, elucidate the mechanisms by which mental focus promotes adaptive self-reflection, and suggest important factors to consider in clinical research and practice.

Hypotheses

Refer to Table 1 for a list of all predictions and associated variables.

Hypothesis 1: Transitional impact and self-relevance. In line with previous research (Boucher & Scoboria, 2015), irrespective of event valence, a coherence focus was expected to reveal higher ratings of perceived impact (material and psychological) and self-relevance (centrality of the event to identity and life-story, importance, connectedness to other life events, and personality change), relative to an experience focus (H1a). Mental focus was also hypothesized to exert greater effects on appraisals of psychological impact relative to material impact (H1b). Finally, in so far as individuals seek to maintain a consistent and positive view of self (McAdams, 1997; Sanitioso, 2008), positive events were predicted to be appraised as more important and central to one's identity and life story, compared to negative events (H1c).

Hypothesis 2: Present affect. After controlling for pre-manipulation state affect, individuals' self-identified reference point for evoked emotion was expected to moderate the effect of mental focus on post-manipulation state affect for events that agreed in valence. That is, (H2a) if emotional response was primarily derived from thinking about the broader consequences of the event, then a *coherence focus* was expected to reveal ratings of *greater* associated emotion, relative to an experience focus (i.e., if a positive event was recalled, positive affect would be higher; if a negative event was recalled, negative affect would be higher). Conversely, (H2b) if emotions mostly stemmed from

Table 1

Hypothesized Effects of Mental Focus on Perceived Impact, Self-Relevance, State Affect, and Cognitive Emotion Regulation Strategies for Valenced Transitional Events

| Independent Variables | Dependent Variables | Hypotheses | Moderators/ Controls |
|--|--|---|---|
| Mental focus: Coherence Experience | Impact: Transitional Impact Scale (TIS-12) | Irrespective of event valence, a coherence (vs. experience) focus should reveal higher ratings of perceived impact and self-relevance. | |
| Transitional valence: Positive Negative | Self-relevance: Centrality of Event Scale (CES) Personality change Importance Connectedness | Mental focus is expected to exert greater effects for psychological impact relative to material impact. Positive (vs. negative) events should be appraised as more important and central to identity and life story. | |
| | State affect: Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) | Reference point for evoked emotion should moderate the effect of mental focus on present affect for events that agree in valence: If emotions are primarily derived from thinking about the broader consequences of the event, then a <i>coherence</i> (vs. experience) <i>focus</i> should reveal <i>higher</i> ratings of associated emotion. If emotions are primarily derived from thinking about what it was like to experience the event, then a <i>coherence</i> (vs. experience) <i>focus</i> should reveal ratings of <i>lower</i> associated emotion. | (Moderator) Reference point for evoked emotion: Experience vs. consequences (adapted from Libby & Eibach, 2011b) (Control) Pre-manipulation state affect: Self-Assessment Mannequin (SAM) |
| | Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (CERQ) | Personality change valence may moderate the effect of mental focus on positive versus negative emotion regulation strategies. | (Moderator) Personality Change Valence (Libby & Eibach, 2011a) |
| | Imagery perspective | If event valence predicts imagery perspective, this would offer support for the self-enhancement motive (Sanitioso, 2008). If self-change predicts imagery perspective, this would lend support for the self-coherence motive (McAdams, 1997). Self-distancing and imagery perspective are expected to positively correlate. | |
| | Memory characteristics | Mental focus is expected to produce small effects on perceptual strength and feeling of reliving, with a coherence focus producing lower ratings than an experience focus. | |

thinking about what it was like to experience the event directly, then a *coherence focus* was hypothesized to reveal ratings of *lower* associated emotion, compared to an experience focus (i.e., if a positive event was recalled, positive affect would be lower; if a negative event was recalled, negative affect would be lower). Due to the fact positive affect and negative affect are theorized to be orthogonal constructs (Watson, Clark, & Tellegan, 1988), and given previous research does not address potential mental focus effects on emotions that run counter to event valence, predictions to these effects were not formulated.

Taken together, hypotheses 1 and 2 support the view that contextualized meaning and present affect do not comprise opposite ends of a single continuum (i.e., a rise in one does not necessarily indicate decline in the other). The self-reflection paradox provides evidence of this (e.g., Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008).

Hypothesis 3: Cognitive emotion regulation strategies. Due to the lack of literature that would enable confident predictions concerning the effects of mental focus on cognitive emotion regulation strategies, the inclusion of this variable was exploratory. However, given Cox and McAdams' (2014) findings that valenced meaning making predicted valenced cognitive emotion regulation strategies, then, (H3) to the extent a coherence focus encompasses more positive meaning relative to an experience focus (as indicated through reports of greater change for the better), a coherence focus was expected to reveal more positive (i.e., adaptive), and less negative (i.e., maladaptive) cognitive emotion regulation strategies. In other words, perceived personality change valence was considered as a possible moderator for mental focus effects on these regulation strategies.

Ancillary hypotheses. Given prior work involving mental focus and imagery perspective (Boucher & Scoboria, 2015; Libby & Eibach, 2011a), mental focus was expected to operate likewise to imagery perspective (coherence/third-person; experience/first-person) but not necessarily in accordance with it. This is because, whereas Libby and Eibach (2011a) manipulated self-change for temporally controlled events, in the current study (as with Boucher & Scoboria, 2015), the events could be drawn from any point in one's past and were themselves characterized by change - a variable implicated as a determinant of third-person imagery. Still, (H4a) if event valence predicts imagery perspective irrespective of mental focus, it would offer support for the self-enhancement motive (Sanitioso, 2008). Alternatively, (H4b) if personality change predicts imagery perspective irrespective of mental focus, this would accord with the self-coherence motive (McAdams, 1997). In any case, (H4c) imagery perspective and self-distance ratings were expected to correlate (third-person/self-distanced vs. first-person/self-immersed). Finally, (H4d) in agreement with prior work (Boucher & Scoboria, 2015), mental focus was expected to produce small effects on aspects of recollection including perceptual strength and feeling of reliving, with a coherence focus producing lower ratings than an experience focus.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

A total of 209 participants (77.5% female; 71.8% White/European; $M_{\text{age}} = 21.30$; $SD = 5.14$, range 17 to 52) were recruited through the University of Windsor's psychology participant pool and received academic credit. For sufficient analytical power, groups were intended to consist of 60 participants ($N = 240$) based on G*Power

calculations (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007), using $d = 0.50$ (Boucher & Scoboria, 2015), $\alpha = .05$, Power = 0.85, two potential covariates, and considerations of dropout, incomplete participation, and/or invalid responding. Inclusion criteria consisted of English as a first language, the willingness to report on a significant past event in a research context, and no prior exposure to the manipulation via earlier studies.

Materials and Measures

Emotional valence, intensity, and reference point. After selecting a transitional event, participants rated the valence, intensity, and reference point for their emotions using Likert scales. The valence item read, “The emotions I have when I recall the episode are,” -3 (*extremely negative*) to 3 (*extremely positive*; Berntsen & Bohn, 2010; Berntsen & Jacobsen, 2008). The intensity item read, “As I am thinking about this event now, my feelings are,” 1 (*not intense*) to 7 (*very intense*; Johnson, Foley, Suengas, & Raye, 1988). These items were also administered post-mental focus manipulation, thus affording an examination of emotion valence and intensity shifting across time points. A modified 8-point mental focus rating scale (adapted from Libby & Eibach, 2011a) was used to derive individuals’ reference points for evoked emotion (i.e., whether emotions primarily derived from thinking about what it was like to experience the event versus its broader consequences; see Appendix B). Introducing these items at a time point (approximately 2 weeks) prior to the mental focus manipulation was meant to limit any potential priming effects (see, Shaeffer, Libby, & Eibach, 2011), offering protection against threats to internal validity; that is, the possibility that exposure to the emotional referent item confounds mental focus effects becomes reduced if introduced at an early enough time point.

State affect, pre-manipulation. The Self-Assessment Mannequin (SAM; Bradley & Lang, 1994), an easy to administer, non-verbal method for quickly assessing emotional valence and arousal, was used to provide an indication of baseline state affect, which was controlled in the analyses (consistent with Kross et al., 2012). The valence subscale, for instance, presents participants with a series of five faces that range in their expression from *extreme frown* to a *broad smile* (see Appendix C). This measure has demonstrated good convergent validity with other measures of affect (e.g., $r = .97$, for the Semantic Differential Scale; Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). In the current study, weak-to-moderate correlations were found for SAM (pleasure and arousal composite) and PANAS ratings: Positive Affect, $r(208) = 0.39$ [0.24, 0.51], and Negative Affect, $r(208) = -0.26$ [-0.40, -0.12].

State affect, post-manipulation. State affect following the mental focus manipulation was assessed using the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988; see Appendix E). The PANAS prompts participants to rate of the extent to which they feel certain emotions, such as “upset” and “proud,” on a scale ranging from 1 (*very slightly or not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). The two 10-item PANAS subscales have demonstrated adequate internal consistency (α ranged from .86 to .90 for PA, and .84 to .87 for NA), quasi-independence (r ranged from -0.12 to -0.23), and stability (8-week test-retest r for the General time frame was .68 for PA and .71 for NA; Watson et al., 1988). Current alphas were .87 for Negative Affect and .89 for Positive Affect.

Transitional impact. Transitional impact was assessed using the 12-item Transitional Impact Scale (TIS-12; Svob, Brown, Reddon, Uzer, & Lee, 2013; see

Appendix F). The TIS-12 identifies changed and stable aspects of a person's life following an event and provides an index of overall impact. It consists of two 6-item subscales: Material Impact (degree of perceived change in the concrete context of daily living) and Psychological Impact (degree of perceived change in thoughts, attitudes, emotions, identity, etc.). Items are rated on 5-point scales ranging from *completely disagree* to *completely agree*. The measure has demonstrated good internal consistency (full scale $\alpha = .83$; Material $\alpha = .79$, Psychological $\alpha = .76$; Svob et al., 2013). Current alphas were .83 for the full scale, .83 for Material Impact, and .78 for Psychological Impact.

Self-relevance. Due to the fact the self-relevance of events is a broad notion with no currently agreed-upon framework for measurement, this study included a number of concepts: the centrality of the event to identity and life-story, the personal importance of the event, the connectedness of the event to other events, and degree of perceived personality change as a result of the event. To assess centrality, the Centrality of Event Scale (CES; Berntsen & Rubin, 2006; see Appendix G) was used, with items anchored 1 (*totally disagree*) to 5 (*totally agree*) and consisting of, for instance, "I feel that event has become part of my identity." The 7-item CES scale has demonstrated good reliability ($\alpha = .88$; Berntsen & Rubin, 2006; $\alpha = .88$ in the current sample). One item assessing life importance was drawn from Berntsen and Bohn (2010), one item pertaining to event connectedness was derived from Rubin, Schrauf, and Greenberg (2003), and an item assessing personality stability vs. change was adapted from Libby and Eibach (2011a). Intercorrelations between the four variables indicated weak-to-moderate shared variance

(r ranged from .24 to .66). Due to their relative independence, each variable was examined separately in the main analyses.

Cognitive emotion regulation strategies. The Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (CERQ; Garnefski, Kraaij, & Spinhoven, 2001) is a 36-item scale measuring nine cognitive coping strategies individuals use after a difficult life experience. Four of the subscales constitute ‘less adaptive’ coping strategies (self-blame, other-blame, rumination, and catastrophizing), and five subscales comprise ‘more adaptive’ coping strategies (positive refocusing, planning, positive reappraisal, putting into perspective, and acceptance). Each item pertains to a single subscale with responses ranging from 1 (*almost never*) to 4 (*almost always*). Garnefski et al. (2001) reported good internal consistency for the Positive (more adaptive) subscale (α ranged from .89 to .91), Negative (less adaptive) subscale (α ranged from .82 to .87), and overall scale (α ranged from .92 to .93), along with adequate-to-good test-retest reliability after 5 months (r ranged from .62 to .64; see Appendix H). In the current sample, alphas were .88, .81, and .81 for the positive subscale, negative subscale, and full scale, respectively.

Items included for secondary analyses. Items associated with the phenomenological experience of remembering were used in order to situate the findings in relation to previous research using these items (Boucher & Scoboria, 2015), and in relation to other autobiographical memory research in which these items are widely used (e.g., Scoboria et al., 2014; see Appendix I). The imagery perspective item, derived from Libby and Eibach (2011a), asks individuals to indicate the relative proportion of images experienced from each perspective using an 8-point scale ranging from *entirely first-person* to *entirely third-person*. A similarly anchored item assessing the extent of

experiential self-immersion versus self-distancing, derived from Ayduk and Kross (2010), was included to examine its relation to imagery perspective and mental focus.

Additional items (drawn from Berntsen & Bohn, 2010; Johnson et al., 1988; Rubin et al., 2003) employed 7-point rating scales that differed in their anchors. These items consisted of emotional valence, emotional intensity, vividness of imagery, strength of perceptual characteristics, feeling of reliving, feeling of re-experiencing, bodily reaction, clarity of location, clarity of objects involved, clarity of people involved, narrative coherence, and frequency thought/talked about. Items assessing subjective temporal distance (derived from Libby & Eibach, 2011a) and objective temporal distance (derived from Berntsen & Bohn, 2010) were included based on prior research suggesting that positive events are reported to feel more recent relative to negative events (Temporal Self-Appraisal Theory; Ross & Wilson, 2002; Wilson & Ross, 2001). The validity of these items was derived from their demonstrated utility in numerous studies that address questions concerning recollective memory and levels of event construal (e.g., Boucher & Scoboria, 2015; D'Argembeau & Van der Linden, 2008; Rubin et al., 2003; Scoboria et al., 2014; Trope & Liberman, 2010).

The Behavioural Identification Form (BIF; Vallacher & Wegner, 1985), a measure of individual differences in the tendency to construe actions abstractly, was included for exploratory purposes based on prior research concerning spontaneous use of construal levels and adaptive outcomes (e.g., Libby, 2003; Libby, Shaeffer, & Eibach, 2009; Vallacher & Wenger, 1989). The BIF includes 25 actions (e.g., "Making a list") that are accompanied by concrete and abstract descriptions ("Writing things down" vs. "Getting organized," respectively). The number of abstract descriptions individuals

endorse provide an index of their preference for abstract construal. This measure has demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha = .85$) and test-retest reliability ($r = .91$; Vallacher & Wegner, 1985; see Appendix J). In the present study, $\alpha = .85$.

Manipulation checks. Likert-scale items assessing personality stability vs. change, personality change valence (change for the worse vs. change for the better), and mental focus (experience vs. coherence) were used to determine event valence and mental focus manipulation fidelity (see Appendix K). These items were derived from Libby and Eibach (2011a) and employ 8-point rating scales. Consistent with prior work (Boucher & Scoboria, 2015), two 5-point items assessing material and psychological impact were used to validate consistency in responding.

Design

Participants were randomly assigned to one cell in a 2 (event valence: positive vs. negative) x 2 (mental focus: coherence vs. experience) between-subjects experimental design. Although main effects of event valence on the dependent variables were not the primary focus of this study (see, D'Argembeau & Van der Linden, 2004, 2008), manipulating event valence was necessary in light of evidence showing that healthy participants are likely to recall twice as many positive events as compared to negative events from their past (the positivity memory bias; Walker, Skowronski, & Thompson, 2003), which could result in unequal cell sizes and valence distributions (i.e., statistical assumption violations).

Procedure

This study was composed of two parts: Part 1 consisted of a brief online questionnaire in which participants were randomly assigned to recall a significant

negative transition (an event that has produced unfavourable personal change) or a significant positive transition (an event that has produced favourable personal change; see Appendix A), provide a cue title for this event, and rate it in terms of its associated emotional valence, emotional intensity, and reference point for evoked emotion. Part 2 took place in a campus computer laboratory at least 10 days later. Participants were randomly assigned to either an experience focus condition or a coherence focus condition. They provided a baseline rating of state affect using the SAM, following which they were presented with their chosen event title and instructed to write a description of the event for 5 to 7 minutes using either an experience focus (emphasizing what it was like to experience the event directly, noting specific sensorial and contextual elements) or a coherence focus (emphasizing the implications of the event within his or her life, noting its relation to personal characteristics and other life events; see Appendix D for verbatim instructions). Following the manipulation, all participants provided ratings for present affect (PANAS), transitional impact (TIS-12), event centrality (CES), cognitive emotion regulation strategies (CERQ), preference for abstraction (BIF), and the additional memory characteristics.

RESULTS

A total of 16 cases were excluded from the analyses due to excessive inconsistency in responding ($n = 1$), not falling within the minimum 10-day time delay ($n = 3$), failing to select a transitional event ($n = 1$), failing to remember the event provided at Time 1 ($n = 1$), responding to the incorrect survey ($n = 1$), and failing to adhere to the mental focus manipulation ($n = 6$). Three univariate outliers (> 3 SDs from the mean) were also eliminated, as their inclusion in the analyses did not alter the results. Taken

together, these exclusions constituted 7.11% of the sample (original $N = 225$). A one-way ANOVA using the personality change valence item (change for the worse vs. change for the better) indicated event valence manipulation fidelity, $F(1,202) = 36.18, p < .001, M_{diff} = 1.14 [0.76, 1.52], d_{unb} = 0.84, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.55, 1.12]$. The same analysis using the mental focus check item failed to indicate mental focus manipulation fidelity, $F(1, 205) = 0.29, p = .593, M_{diff} = 0.17 [-0.44, 0.78], d_{unb} = 0.08 [-0.20, 0.35]$, however, given this item was located at the end of the questionnaire (after multiple memory characteristic items), this finding holds questionable validity. The narratives were analyzed, using a conservative approach to elimination, and it was determined that 97.2% ($n = 209$) of the sample sufficiently (i.e., in 70-100% of their narrative) followed the mental focus instructions.

Prior to the main analyses, the transitional events selected by individuals were categorized (see Table 2 for proportions). The following categories were identified: interpersonal growth, interpersonal dissolution, medical/psychological condition, educational, occupational, travel/relocation, and other. Negative transitions were primarily (80%) comprised of medical/psychological conditions and interpersonal dissolutions, while positive transitions mainly (73%) consisted of educational achievements, interpersonal growth experiences, and travel/relocation. Of worthy note, it was possible for the same transition type to carry different subjective valence attributions (e.g., a break-up may be construed as a negative event by some and a positive event by others). Further, the transition itself may have occurred primarily (71%) or secondarily (29%) to the participant (e.g., receiving a serious diagnosis oneself vs. a close other receiving a serious diagnosis). The types of events reported within each valence condition between the coherence and experience groups were similar.

Table 2

Transition Types by Experimental Group

| | Negative Events | | Positive Events | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| | Coherence (<i>n</i> = 54) | Experience (<i>n</i> = 52) | Coherence (<i>n</i> = 54) | Experience (<i>n</i> = 49) |
| Interpersonal growth | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.21 | 0.29 |
| Interpersonal dissolution | 0.37 | 0.31 | 0.05 | 0.06 |
| Medical/psychological | 0.44 | 0.47 | 0.02 | 0.06 |
| Educational | 0.08 | 0.11 | 0.48 | 0.25 |
| Occupational | 0.03 | 0.05 | 0.09 | 0.12 |
| Travel/relocation | 0.07 | 0.04 | 0.13 | 0.10 |
| Other | 0.00 | 0.02 | 0.02 | 0.12 |

Note. Proportions of transition types were calculated out of the total within each experimental group: negative-coherence, negative-experience, positive-coherence, and positive-experience.

Per Cumming (2012), calculations of mean differences (M_{diffs}), standardized unbiased effect sizes (d_{unb}), and associated 95% confidence intervals were used to analyze the data. This method is conducive to transparent, meta-analytic reporting and reduces reliance on the interpretation of p -values, which can be unreliable (Cumming, 2012; Kirk, 1996). Correlations and omnibus F -tests, some of which included covariates, guided the analyses and the reporting of results, however, p -values were not used to determine their statistical meaning. Refer to Table 3 for descriptives on the main dependent variables by experimental group.

Transitional Impact and Self-Relevance

Mental focus and event valence effects were examined for the Transitional Impact Scale (TIS-12), Centrality of Event Scale (CES), and individual items assessing event importance, personality change, and event connectedness (see Figure 1 for TIS and CES ratings by group). Average TIS-12 and CES scores were in the upper half of the 1-5 point

Table 3

Transitional Impact, Self-Relevance, State Affect, Cognitive Emotion Regulation, and Preference for Abstraction Scores by Experimental Group

| | Negative Events | | | | Positive Events | | | |
|---|----------------------------|-----------|-----------------------------|-----------|----------------------------|-----------|-----------------------------|-----------|
| | Coherence (<i>n</i> = 54) | | Experience (<i>n</i> = 52) | | Coherence (<i>n</i> = 54) | | Experience (<i>n</i> = 49) | |
| | <i>M</i> [95% CI] | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> [95% CI] | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> [95% CI] | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> [95% CI] | <i>SD</i> |
| Psychological impact (TIS-P) | 4.23 [4.07,4.38] | 0.57 | 3.74 [3.51, 3.96] | 0.80 | 3.82 [3.64,4.00] | 0.66 | 3.89 [3.69, 4.09] | 0.69 |
| Material impact (TIS-M) | 2.90 [2.59,3.20] | 1.11 | 2.79 [2.48,3.11] | 1.12 | 3.20 [2.97,3.43] | 0.85 | 3.32 [3.02,3.61] | 1.04 |
| Event centrality (CES) | 3.63 [3.37,3.90] | 0.98 | 3.45 [3.15,3.75] | 1.09 | 4.02 [3.81,4.23] | 0.78 | 3.87 [3.63,4.11] | 0.84 |
| Event importance | 5.93 [5.57,6.28] | 1.30 | 5.92 [5.51,6.33] | 1.47 | 6.50 [6.30,6.70] | 0.75 | 6.45 [6.19,6.71] | 0.91 |
| Connectedness | 4.87 [4.31,5.43] | 2.05 | 4.58 [4.02,5.13] | 1.99 | 4.72 [4.22,5.23] | 1.85 | 5.41 [4.88,5.93] | 1.83 |
| Personality change | 6.13 [5.77,6.49] | 1.30 | 5.42 [4.95,5.90] | 1.71 | 5.72 [5.35,6.09] | 1.37 | 6.00 [5.52,6.48] | 1.66 |
| Personality change valence ^a | 5.65 [5.18,6.12] | 1.72 | 5.90 [5.47,6.33] | 1.50 | 6.81 [6.54,7.09] | 1.00 | 7.02 [6.71,7.33] | 1.06 |
| Positive affect (PA) | 2.43 [2.17, 2.69] | 0.95 | 2.71 [2.48, 2.94] | 0.84 | 3.04 [2.85,3.24] | 0.72 | 2.81 [2.54, 3.07] | 0.92 |
| Negative affect (NA) | 1.77 [1.58,1.96] | 0.71 | 2.03 [1.83, 2.24] | 0.75 | 1.48 [1.35,1.62] | 0.50 | 1.59 [1.40, 1.78] | 0.66 |
| Emotion valence ^b Time 1 | -2.25[-2.49,-2.00] | 0.90 | -1.88[-2.21,-1.56] | 1.17 | 2.06 [1.70,2.41] | 1.30 | 2.06 [1.70,2.42] | 1.27 |
| Emotion valence ^b Time 2 | -1.37[-1.71,-1.03] | 1.25 | -1.56[-1.90,-1.21] | 1.24 | 2.28 [2.01,2.55] | 1.00 | 1.88 [1.42,2.33] | 1.59 |
| Emotion intensity | 4.22 [3.76,4.69] | 1.70 | 4.35 [3.88,4.81] | 1.68 | 3.96 [3.54,4.38] | 1.53 | 4.39 [3.95,4.83] | 1.53 |
| Positive regulation (CERQ-P) | 3.48 [3.32,3.63] | 0.56 | 3.45 [3.26,3.64] | 0.69 | 3.43 [3.27,3.59] | 0.60 | 3.47 [3.25,3.68] | 0.75 |
| Negative regulation (CERQ-N) | 2.71 [2.54,2.89] | 0.64 | 2.79 [2.62,2.95] | 0.59 | 2.76 [2.59,2.93] | 0.62 | 2.92 [2.76,3.08] | 0.56 |
| Preference for abstraction (BIF) | 0.61 [0.54,0.68] | 0.25 | 0.62 [0.56,0.67] | 0.20 | 0.59 [0.54,0.64] | 0.19 | 0.57 [0.51,0.63] | 0.21 |

Note. a = higher scores indicate change for the better (vs. worse); b = higher scores indicate positive emotion (vs. negative emotion).

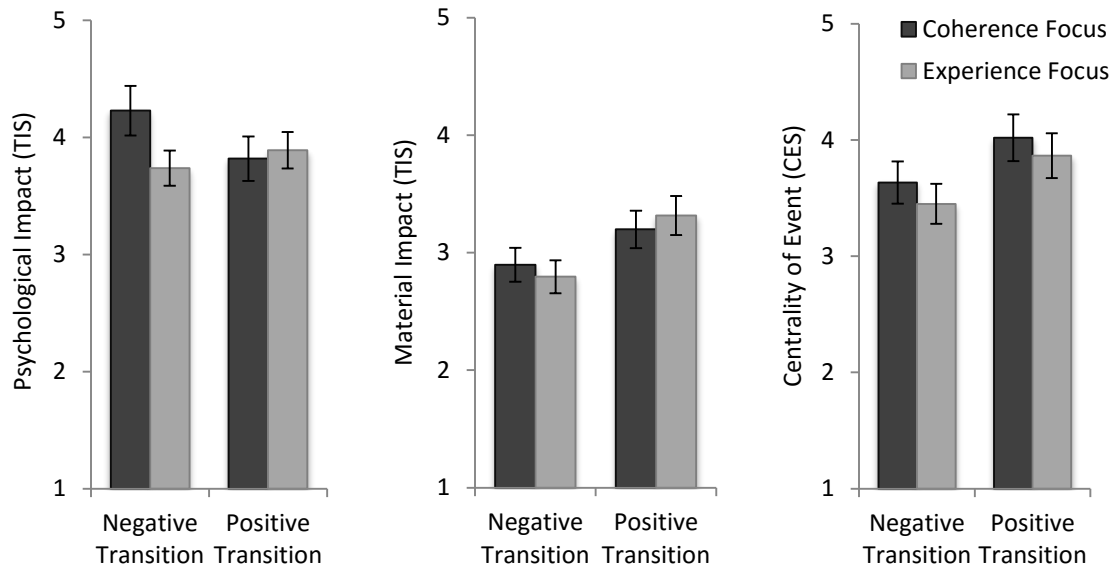


Figure 1. Transitional Impact Scale (TIS-12) Psychological subscale and Material subscale, and Centrality of Event Scale (CES) mean ratings by mental focus (coherence vs. experience) and event valence (positive vs. negative). The error bars show 95% confidence intervals.

scales and event importance was rated in the upper half of the 1-7 point scale, indicating that individuals did select personally significant events characterized by change: TIS-Psychological, $M = 3.92$ [3.82, 4.01]; TIS-Material, $M = 3.05$ [2.90, 3.19]; CES, $M = 3.74$ [3.61, 3.86]; and importance, $M = 6.20$ [6.04, 6.36]. Psychological impact was rated higher than material impact for both negative events, $M_{diff} = 1.14$ [0.89, 1.39], $d_{unb} = 1.24$ [0.98, 1.49], and positive events, $M_{diff} = 0.60$ [0.37, 0.82], $d_{unb} = 0.74$ [0.52, 0.96].

Psychological impact. For the TIS-Psychological subscale, a coherence focus resulted in higher average psychological impact scores relative to an experience focus for negative events, $M_{diff} = 0.49$ [0.22, 0.76], $d_{unb} = 0.70$ [0.31, 1.10], but not positive events, $M_{diff} = 0.07$ [-0.19, 0.34], $d_{unb} = 0.11$ [-0.28, 0.49]. Participants in the negative-coherence condition produced the highest average rating of psychological impact relative to all other

groups combined, $M_{diff} = 0.41$ [0.34, 1.30], $d_{unb} = 0.47$ [0.19, 0.74], and these other groups (negative-experience, positive-coherence, and positive-experience) did not statistically differ from each other (CIs included zero). There was no effect of valence on psychological impact, $M_{diff} = 0.13$ [-0.06, 0.33], $d_{unb} = 0.19$ [-0.08, 0.46].

Material impact. For the TIS-Material subscale, individuals who recalled a positive event reported greater material impact, on average, relative to those who recalled a negative event, $M_{diff} = 0.41$ [0.13, 0.69], $d_{unb} = 0.39$ [0.12, 0.67]. Mental focus did not inform material impact ratings overall, $M_{diff} = 0.00$ [-0.29, 0.29], $d_{unb} = 0.00$ [-0.27, 0.27], or within valence conditions: for negative events, $M_{diff} = 0.10$ [-0.33, 0.53], $d_{unb} = 0.09$ [-0.29, 0.47]; and for positive events, $M_{diff} = 0.12$ [-0.25, 0.49], $d_{unb} = 0.12$ [-0.26, 0.51].

Self-relevance. Regarding the CES, individuals in the positive event conditions reported that their event was more central to their identity and life story, on average, relative to those in the negative event conditions, $M_{diff} = 0.40$ [0.15, 0.66], $d_{unb} = 0.43$ [0.16, 0.71]. The positive-coherence group rated their event as more central to their identity and life story relative to the negative-experience group, $M_{diff} = 0.57$ [0.20, 0.93], $d_{unb} = 0.60$ [0.21, 0.99]. The results did not indicate a statistically meaningful effect of mental focus on event centrality, $M_{diff} = 0.18$ [-0.08, 0.43], $d_{unb} = 0.18$ [-0.09, 0.46], however the means were in the expected direction. The positive event groups also provided higher average ratings of event importance relative to the negative event groups, $M_{diff} = 0.56$ [0.25, 0.87], $d_{unb} = 0.49$ [0.21, 0.76]. Importance attributions were not impacted by mental focus, $M_{diff} = 0.03$ [-0.29, 0.35], $d_{unb} = 0.03$ [-0.25, 0.30].

With respect to perceived personality change as a result of the event, similar to the pattern found for psychological impact, a coherence focus was associated with reports

of greater personality change relative to an experience focus for negative events, $M_{diff} = 0.71$ [0.13, 1.29], $d_{umb} = 0.47$ [0.08, 0.85], but not positive events, $M_{diff} = 0.28$ [-0.32, 0.88], $d_{umb} = 0.18$ [-0.21, 0.57]. Those in the negative-experience condition produced the lowest average ratings of personality change compared to the other groups combined, $M_{diff} = 0.53$ [0.05, 1.00], $d_{umb} = 0.35$ [0.03, 0.66], while these other groups (negative-coherence, positive-coherence, and positive-experience) did not statistically differ from each other (CIs included zero). There was no effect of valence on perceived personality change, $M_{diff} = 0.07$ [-0.35, 0.49], $d_{umb} = 0.05$ [-0.23, 0.32].

Finally, regarding connectedness (i.e., how connected the event was perceived to be with other life events), results revealed no main effects of mental focus, $M_{diff} = 0.18$ [-0.26, 0.62], $d_{umb} = 0.11$ [-0.16, 0.38], or event valence, $M_{diff} = 0.32$ [-0.13, 0.77], $d_{umb} = 0.19$ [-0.08, 0.46]. Within the experience focus conditions, participants who recalled a positive event produced higher average connectedness ratings compared to those who recalled a negative event, $M_{diff} = 0.83$ [0.07, 1.59], $d_{umb} = 0.43$ [0.03, 0.82], whereas the coherence focus groups did not differ, $M_{diff} = 0.15$ [-0.59, 0.89], $d_{umb} = 0.08$ [-0.30, 0.45]. All other between-group differences for impact and self-relevance items approximated zero.

Present Affect

To test whether individuals' reference point for evoked emotion moderated the effect of mental focus on post-manipulation positive and negative affect over and above pre-manipulation affect, I first examined whether these variables correlated using a two-tailed bivariate correlational analysis, bootstrapped using 1000 samples. No statistically reliable correlations were found within the positive event conditions, or the negative

event conditions (CIs for correlations included zero). It therefore made little sense to continue with the planned hierarchical multiple regression analyses, and I turned to an examination of mean differences and effect sizes using 2 (mental focus) x 2 (event valence) x 2 (emotional reference point) ANCOVAs, controlling for baseline affect (SAM ratings) to acquire adjusted group means (refer to Figure 2 for a depiction of these results).

Negative affect. For negative affect, the results yielded small-to-moderate effects of mental focus, $M_{diff} = 0.21$ [0.04, 0.38], $d_{unb} = 0.34$ [0.06, 0.61], and event valence, $M_{diff} = 0.31$ [0.14, 0.48], $d_{unb} = 0.49$ [0.21, 0.76]. Individuals who used a coherence focus reported lower negative affect, on average, relative to those who used an experience focus and, in line with assigned valence conditions, those who recalled a negative event reported greater negative affect, on average, compared to those who recalled a positive event. Accordingly, the negative-experience group reported greater negative affect relative to the negative-coherence group, $M_{diff} = 0.31$ [0.07, 0.55], $d_{unb} = 0.50$ [0.11, 0.89], the positive-experience group, $M_{diff} = 0.41$ [0.16, 0.65], $d_{unb} = 0.65$ [0.25, 1.05], and especially the positive-coherence group, $M_{diff} = 0.52$ [0.28, 0.76], $d_{unb} = 0.82$ [0.43, 1.22], and these last three groups did not statistically differ from each other (CIs included zero). Between-group contrasts did not reveal mental focus-by-emotional reference point interactions (differences were near zero); it is worth noting that these contrasts entailed small and uneven cell sizes (ranging from $n = 23$ to $n = 31$).

Positive affect. The same analyses were carried out for positive affect revealing an effect of valence, $M_{diff} = 0.28$ [0.05, 0.50], $d_{unb} = 0.34$ [0.06, 0.61], with those in the positive event conditions reporting greater positive affect, on average, relative to those in

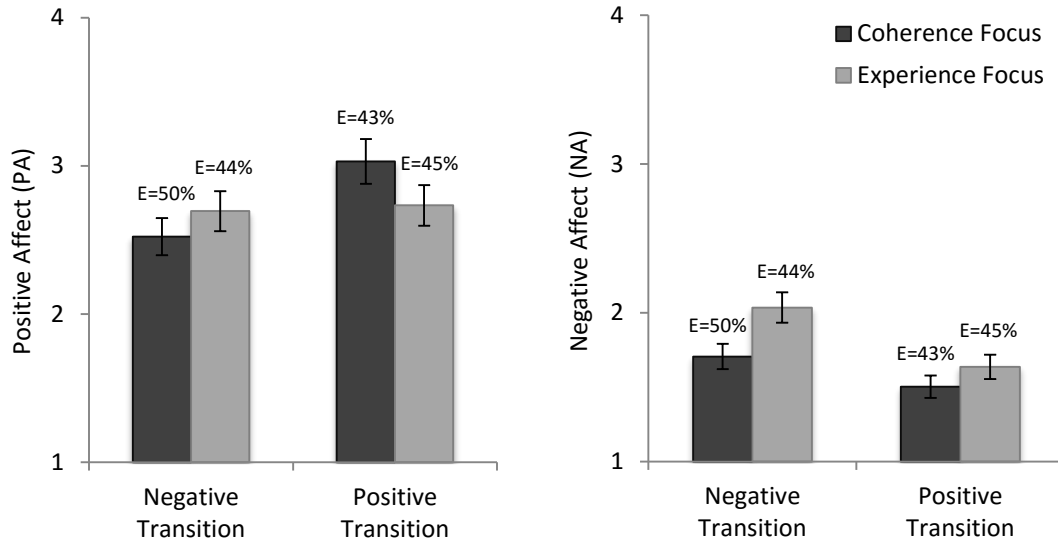


Figure 2. Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) Positive Affect (PA) and Negative Affect (NA) adjusted mean ratings by mental focus (coherence vs. experience) and event valence (positive vs. negative), controlling for Self-Assessment Mannequin (SAM) Pleasure and Arousal. E = the percentage of participants in the group indicating that their emotions mostly resulted from thinking about what it was like to experience the event; the remaining participants indicated that their emotions mostly resulted from thinking about the broader consequences of the event. The scales were anchored 1 to 5. The error bars show 95% confidence intervals.

the negative event conditions. The results did not indicate an effect of mental focus on positive affect overall, $M_{diff} = 0.02$ [-0.22, 0.26], $d_{unb} = 0.02$ [-0.25, 0.30], or within emotional referent groups, where between group differences approximated zero (ns ranged from 22 to 31).

Finally, positive affect mean ratings were found to be statistically greater than negative affect mean ratings for both positive events, $M_{diff} = 1.40$ [1.20, 1.59], $d_{unb} = 1.99$ [1.65, 2.32], and negative events, $M_{diff} = 0.67$ [0.44, 0.89], $d_{unb} = 0.81$ [0.59, 1.03].

Emotion ratings pre vs. post mental focus manipulation. Emotion valence ratings pre- versus post-mental focus manipulation were compared using a 2 (mental focus) x 2

(event valence) x 2 (time point) repeated measures ANOVA to acquire adjusted group means (refer to Table 4 for effects across time). Sphericity assumed, the results indicated a small effect of time, $M_{diff} = 0.31$ [0.07, 0.54], $d_{unb} = 0.25$ [0.11, 0.39], wherein emotion ratings tended to become more positive (and less negative), on average, from Time 1 to Time 2. Effects of mental focus and event valence over time were qualified the interaction: Those in the negative-coherence condition showed a greater shift toward positive emotion over time, while the other groups showed no statistically reliable change in emotion ratings from Time 1 to Time 2 (CIs included zero). At each time point, those in the positive (vs. negative) transition conditions reported greater positive (relative to negative) emotion when recalling their transitional event: Time 1, $M_{diff} = 4.12$ [3.80, 4.44], $d_{unb} = 3.52$ [3.08, 3.95]; Time 2, $M_{diff} = 3.55$ [3.20, 3.90], $d_{unb} = 2.76$ [2.38, 3.14]. All other between-group contrasts were null (differences were near zero).

Emotional intensity. Identical analyses were carried out for emotional intensity (refer to Table 5). Sphericity assumed, the results indicated a marginal decrease in emotional intensity ratings from Time 1 to Time 2 for those in the positive event groups, $M_{diff} = -0.33$ [-0.77, -0.11], $d_{unb} = -0.21$ [-0.41, -0.01], but not negative event groups, $M_{diff} = 0.16$ [-0.27, 0.59], $d_{unb} = 0.10$ [-0.09, 0.29]. Emotional intensity ratings did not differ between positive and negative event groups at Time 1, $M_{diff} = 0.38$ [-0.05, 0.82], $d_{unb} = 0.24$ [-0.03, 0.51], or Time 2, $M_{diff} = 0.12$ [-0.33, 0.56], $d_{unb} = 0.07$ [-0.20, 0.34]. Group contrasts did not reveal a main effect of time, or other interaction effects (CIs included zero).

Table 4

Emotional Valence Ratings Pre versus Post Mental Focus Manipulation

| Condition | Time 1 | | Time 2 | | Difference from Time 1 to Time 2 | |
|------------------------------|---------------------|-----------|---------------------|-----------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| | <i>M</i> [95% CI] | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> [95% CI] | <i>SD</i> | <i>M_{diff}</i> [95% CI] | <i>d_{umb}</i> [95% CI] |
| Coherence | | | | | | |
| Negative (<i>n</i> = 53) | -2.25 [-2.56,-1.93] | 1.17 | -1.38 [-1.73,-1.03] | 1.28 | 0.87 [0.40,1.34] | 0.71 [0.41,1.01] |
| Positive (<i>n</i> = 54) | 2.06 [1.74,2.37] | 1.17 | 2.28 [1.93,2.62] | 1.28 | 0.22 [-0.25,0.69] | 0.18 [-0.09,0.45] |
| Experience | | | | | | |
| Negative (<i>n</i> = 52) | -1.89 [-2.20,-1.57] | 1.17 | -1.56 [-1.91,-1.21] | 1.28 | 0.33 [-0.15,0.80] | 0.27 [-0.01,0.54] |
| Positive (<i>n</i> = 49) | 2.06 [1.73,2.39] | 1.16 | 1.88 [1.52,2.24] | 1.28 | -0.18 [-0.67,0.31] | -0.15 [-0.43,0.13] |

Note. Based on adjusted means; sphericity assumed.

Table 5

Emotional Intensity Ratings Pre versus Post Mental Focus Manipulation

| Condition | Time 1 | | Time 2 | | Difference from Time 1 to Time 2 | |
|------------------------------|-------------------|-----------|-------------------|-----------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| | <i>M</i> [95% CI] | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> [95% CI] | <i>SD</i> | <i>M_{diff}</i> [95% CI] | <i>d_{umb}</i> [95% CI] |
| Coherence | | | | | | |
| Negative (<i>n</i> = 54) | 4.06 [3.63,4.48] | 1.59 | 4.22 [3.79,4.66] | 1.61 | 0.17 [-0.44,0.78] | 0.10 [-0.16,0.37] |
| Positive (<i>n</i> = 53) | 4.30 [3.87,4.73] | 1.59 | 3.96 [3.53,4.40] | 1.62 | -0.34 [-0.96,0.28] | -0.21 [-0.48,0.06] |
| Experience | | | | | | |
| Negative (<i>n</i> = 52) | 4.19 [3.76,4.63] | 1.59 | 4.35 [3.91,4.79] | 1.62 | 0.15 [-0.47,0.78] | 0.10 [-0.18,0.37] |
| Positive (<i>n</i> = 49) | 4.71 [4.27,5.16] | 1.59 | 4.39 [3.93,4.84] | 1.61 | -0.33 [-0.97,0.32] | -0.20 [-0.48,0.08] |

Note. Based on adjusted means; sphericity assumed.

Cognitive Emotion Regulation Strategies

To test whether personality change valence moderated the effect of mental focus on cognitive emotion regulation strategies in response to stressful life events in general, I first examined whether these items correlated using a two-tailed bivariate correlational analysis with 1000 samples bootstrapping. Mental focus and personality change valence were not found to correlate with each other or with any regulation strategies (CIs on correlations included zero), suggesting insufficient grounds to continue with moderation analyses.

I then explored cognitive emotion regulation strategies by experimental condition using 2 (mental focus) x 2 (event valence) ANOVAs. Small-to-moderate effects of event valence emerged for self-blame, $M_{diff} = 0.34$ [0.05, 0.63], $d_{unb} = 0.32$ [0.05, 0.59], and the need for acceptance, $M_{diff} = 0.28$ [0.06, 0.51], $d_{unb} = 0.34$ [0.07, 0.62], such that those who recalled a negative event indicated that they tended to assume less responsibility for unpleasant events and that they generally felt a greater need to accept such events, on average, relative to those who recalled a positive event. The results did not reveal effects of event valence on the remaining regulation strategies (blaming others, rumination, catastrophizing, putting into perspective, positive refocusing, refocus on planning, and positive reappraisal). Finally, mental focus was not found to affect ratings on any cognitive emotion regulation strategies overall, or within valence conditions (between-group differences approximated zero). Controlling for BIF scores (due to correlations subsequently noted) did not alter these findings.

Ancillary Analyses

Imagery perspective. With regard to the imagery perspective individuals used

when recalling their transitional event, the results indicated that they tended to use a greater proportion of first-person imagery, $M = 3.35$ [3.02, 3.69], relative to third-person imagery overall (8-point scale ranging from *entirely first-person* to *entirely third-person*). Group contrasts did not reveal effects of mental focus, $M_{diff} = 0.24$ [-0.38, 0.86], $d_{unb} = 0.11$ [-0.17, 0.38], event valence, $M_{diff} = 0.05$ [-0.57, 0.67], $d_{unb} = 0.02$ [-0.25, 0.29], or interactions (differences were near zero; see Table 6 for descriptives on memory characteristics by experimental group).

Two-tailed bivariate correlational analyses, bootstrapped using 1000 samples, were used to assess relationships amongst imagery perspective, self-distancing, personality change, personality change valence, and re-experiencing. Imagery perspective was found to correlate with self-distancing, $r(207) = 0.72$ [0.61, 0.81], such that greater use of third-person imagery coincided with reports of greater self-distancing. Both imagery perspective and self-distancing correlated with feeling of re-experiencing, wherein greater use of third-person imagery or greater self-distancing was associated with lower feelings of re-experiencing, $r(207) = -0.17$ [-0.32, -0.02], and $r(207) = -0.28$ [-0.41, -0.13], respectively. All other correlations were null (CIs included zero).

Additional Memory Characteristics. Group contrasts were used to examine the influence of mental focus and event valence on additional memory characteristics. Small-to-moderate mental focus effects were found for clarity, $M_{diff} = 0.53$ [0.18, 0.88], $d_{unb} = 0.42$ [0.14, 0.70], perceptual detail, $M_{diff} = 0.55$ [0.18, 0.92], $d_{unb} = 0.41$ [0.13, 0.68], reliving, $M_{diff} = 0.46$ [0.01, 0.92], $d_{unb} = 0.28$ [0.01, 0.55], and reaction, $M_{diff} = 0.54$ [0.01, 1.08], $d_{unb} = 0.27$ [0.01, 0.55], with those in the experience focus conditions providing higher ratings on all of these variables. Effects of event valence were also found for

Table 6

Memory Characteristic Ratings by Experimental Group

| | Negative Events | | | | Positive Events | | | |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------|-----------------------------|-----------|----------------------------|-----------|-----------------------------|-----------|
| | Coherence (<i>n</i> = 54) | | Experience (<i>n</i> = 52) | | Coherence (<i>n</i> = 54) | | Experience (<i>n</i> = 49) | |
| | <i>M</i> [95% CI] | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> [95% CI] | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> [95% CI] | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> [95% CI] | <i>SD</i> |
| Imagery perspective ^a | 3.50 [2.88,4.12] | 2.29 | 3.25 [2.59,3.91] | 2.37 | 2.98 [2.39,3.57] | 2.17 | 3.71 [3.06,4.36] | 2.26 |
| Self-immersion/ distance | 3.28 [2.74,3.82] | 1.98 | 2.65[2.17,3.13] | 1.73 | 2.91 [2.41,3.40] | 1.80 | 2.82 [2.32,3.32] | 1.74 |
| Clarity ^b | 5.25[4.81,5.69] | 1.61 | 5.83 [5.55,6.10] | 0.98 | 5.43 [5.07,5.79] | 1.31 | 5.87 [5.59,6.15] | 0.97 |
| Vividness | 5.36 [4.89,5.83] | 1.71 | 5.49 [5.11, 5.87] | 1.36 | 5.04 [4.65,5.42] | 1.41 | 5.47 [5.11,5.83] | 1.26 |
| Perceptual detail | 5.11 [4.67,5.56] | 1.63 | 5.50 [5.19,5.81] | 1.11 | 4.72 [4.33,5.11] | 1.42 | 5.41 [5.09,5.72] | 1.10 |
| Reliving | 3.74 [3.26,4.22] | 1.75 | 4.23 [3.77,4.69] | 1.65 | 4.07 [3.65,4.50] | 1.56 | 4.57 [4.11,5.03] | 1.61 |
| Reaction | 3.15 [2.61,3.68] | 1.96 | 3.78 [3.19,4.38] | 2.12 | 3.22 [2.72,3.72] | 1.83 | 3.71 [3.17,4.25] | 1.88 |
| Re-experiencing ^c | 4.27 [3.87,4.66] | 1.46 | 4.48 [4.13,4.83] | 1.24 | 4.27 [3.92,4.61] | 1.27 | 4.66 [4.31,5.01] | 1.21 |
| Difficulty picturing | 2.98 [2.43,3.53] | 2.02 | 3.48 [2.94,4.02] | 1.94 | 2.04 [1.71,2.36] | 1.18 | 2.10 [1.69,2.52] | 1.42 |
| Story complexity | 3.98 [3.49,4.48] | 1.82 | 4.27 [3.82,4.72] | 1.62 | 3.47 [2.98,3.97] | 1.79 | 3.27 [2.75,3.78] | 1.78 |
| Subjective event duration | 4.74 [4.23,5.25] | 1.88 | 4.87 [4.31,5.42] | 1.98 | 4.07 [3.68,4.47] | 1.45 | 3.81 [3.32,4.30] | 1.68 |
| Objective event duration | 2.83 [2.49,3.18] | 1.26 | 2.40 [2.06,2.74] | 1.23 | 2.61 [2.24,2.98] | 1.37 | 2.59 [2.19,3.00] | 1.41 |
| Subjective temporal distance | 4.87 [3.97,5.77] | 3.30 | 4.88 [3.98,5.78] | 3.23 | 4.46 [3.69,5.23] | 2.83 | 4.96 [4.05,5.87] | 3.16 |
| Objective temporal distance | 5.83 [4.41,7.26] | 5.22 | 3.88 [2.76,5.01] | 4.00 | 2.96 [2.05,3.88] | 3.36 | 2.98 [1.95,4.01] | 3.56 |
| Thought/talked | 4.80 [4.30,5.29] | 1.81 | 4.65 [4.13,5.18] | 1.90 | 4.44 [3.97,4.92] | 1.73 | 4.53 [4.03,5.03] | 1.73 |

Note. *a* = higher scores indicate greater third-person (vs. first-person) imagery; *b* = composite of three items: clarity of location, objects, and people; *c.*= composite of three items: reliving, emotional re-experiencing, and time travel.

difficulty picturing, $M_{diff} = 1.11$ [0.64, 1.58], $d_{unb} = 0.66$ [0.37, 0.94], narrative complexity, $M_{diff} = 0.75$ [0.26, 1.24], $d_{unb} = 0.42$ [0.15, 0.70], subjective event duration, $M_{diff} = 0.80$ [0.31, 1.29], $d_{unb} = 0.45$ [0.17, 0.73], and objective temporal distance $M_{diff} = 1.92$ [0.78, 3.05], $d_{unb} = 0.46$ [0.18, 0.74]. Individuals who recalled a negative event were more likely to report that, on average, the event was more difficult to picture, more complex, felt like it lasted longer, and was dated to have occurred in the more distal past. Events were also generally rated as having occurred over the course of many days to one month, $M = 2.61$ [2.43, 2.79]. No main effects emerged for items assessing feeling of re-experiencing, vividness, objective event duration, subjective temporal distance, and frequency with which the event was thought or talked about (between-group differences were near zero).

Behavioural Identification Form. To assess whether individual differences in the tendency to abstract (BIF scores) were associated with variables related to self-change (based on Libby & Eibach, 2011a) or emotional valence (based on Ayduk & Kross, 2010; Kross & Ayduk, 2011), two-tailed bivariate correlational analyses, bootstrapped using 1000 samples, were used.

Personality change. BIF scores were not found to correlate with personality change, $r(200) = 0.09$ [-0.05, 0.22], however, they did correlate with personality change valence for negative events, $r(101) = 0.32$ [0.16, 0.47], such that the selection of more abstract BIF responses coincided with reports of greater change for the better as a result of the event. BIF scores and change valence were not related for positive events, $r(97) = -0.03$ [-0.20, 0.15].

Affect. Greater preferences for abstraction (BIF scores) correlated with higher ratings of positive affect, $r(104) = 0.25 [0.05, 0.43]$, and lower ratings of negative affect, $r(104) = -0.23 [-0.41, -0.05]$, for those in the negative event conditions, but not for those in the positive event conditions: positive affect, $r(100) = 0.19 [0.01, 0.37]$; negative affect, $r(100) = -0.07 [-0.28, 0.12]$.

CERQ. BIF scores were found to correlate with rumination, $r(206) = -0.16 [-0.30, -0.02]$, blaming oneself, $r(206) = -0.19 [-0.33, -0.06]$, blaming others, $r(206) = -0.15 [-0.29, -0.01]$, and positive reappraisal, $r(206) = 0.20 [0.07, 0.33]$. As BIF scores increased, reported inclinations to ruminate and blame oneself and others for unpleasant events decreased, while reported tendencies to engage in positive reappraisal increased. For negative events, increases in BIF scores corresponded with lower levels of rumination, $r(104) = -0.32 [-0.48, -0.14]$, and self-blame, $r(104) = -0.25 [-0.43, -0.07]$, and higher levels of positive refocusing, $r(104) = 0.23 [0.04, 0.40]$, and positive reappraising, $r(104) = 0.22 [0.03, 0.38]$. For positive events, increases in BIF scores were associated with increases in positive reappraisal, $r(100) = 0.20 [0.01, 0.37]$. All other CERQ subscales did not statistically correlate with BIF scores (CIs included zero).

DISCUSSION

In light of theoretical and empirical discrepancies concerning the effects of cognitive strategies for autobiographical event representation on emotion and meaning making, along with the relative lack of literature examining positive transitions, this study set out to investigate how focusing on the concrete details (*experience focus*) versus broader life significance (*coherence focus*) of self-selected positive versus negative past transitions influences appraisals of event impact, self-relevance, and present affect.

Ancillary aims were to explore effects of mental focus and event valence on cognitive emotion regulation strategies and phenomenological aspects of recollection, along with potential relationships with individual preferences for abstraction.

Transitional Impact and Self-Relevance

Findings for transitional impact and self-relevance partly replicated prior work (Boucher & Scoboria, 2015), in that overall psychological impact ratings were higher than material impact ratings, and a coherence focus was associated with ratings of greater psychological impact and personality change as a result of the event, relative to an experience focus, but only for those who recalled a negative transition. For individuals who recalled a positive transition, ratings of psychological impact and personality change did not differ as a function of mental focus. This offers support for the self-enhancement motive in suggesting that individuals are more inclined to reconcile negative transitions (which prompt views of self-decline) as compared to positive transitions (which prompt views of self-improvement). In other words, negative transitions appear to pose a greater threat to the enhancement of the current self, via the implication that one's past self was more favourable in comparison.

Self-enhancement (Sanitioso, 2008) and self-coherence (McAdams, 1997) aims are, however, not mutually exclusive, and in fact, the current findings illustrate their simultaneous operation. Given peoples' desire to maintain a sense of improvement over time, it follows that present selves are generally held in higher regard relative to past selves (e.g., Baumeister, 1998). In prompting individuals to contemplate positive transitions, the valence change (from less favourable to more favourable) necessarily coincides with, and aptly precedes, current views of the self (self-consistency), whereas

for negative transitions, the trajectory of self-change (from more favourable to less favourable) disagrees with the ideal for present self-views (self-inconsistency). Perhaps then, the motive to reconcile past events is not solely driven by perceptions of change in the self, but rather, whether the valence of such change accords with the default valence of current self-views. This is to say that for negative transitions, the desire to maintain a sense of self-continuity over time firmly collides with the need to preserve a current positive self-view, and both objectives may explain why appraisals of negative transitions were more sensitive to mental focus manipulations relative to those for positive transitions.

Specifically, because a coherence focus incites an overarching view of how a significant negative transition contrasts with other events within one's (generally stable and positive; McAdams, 2001; Walker et al., 2003) life narrative, while an experience focus entails no such juxtaposition, it is staged to magnify evaluations of psychological impact and personality change (while an experience focus is positioned to minimize or maintain these appraisals). Again, this is particularly true for negative transitions because they pose a greater threat to self-enhancement and self-coherence objectives relative to positive transitions. That individuals who focused on the coherence features of a negative event produced the highest ratings of psychological impact relative to all other groups (while these other groups did not differ from each other) agrees with this account, although it is important to note that the direction and magnitude of mental focus effects eclipses the current research design. In order to fully understand how mental focus informs psychological impact and personality change ratings from baseline (i.e., whether

a coherence focus drives increases, an experience focus drives decreases, or both) a pre-post research design, with the inclusion of a control group, would be necessary.

Regarding other elements of event meaning, in light of prior research (Boucher & Scoboria, 2015), it is surprising that appraisals of material impact, event centrality, and importance did not vary in accordance with mental focus but did vary as a function of event valence, such that ratings were greater for positive events relative to negative events. Methodological differences amongst studies are worth noting here. Firstly, while Boucher and Scoboria (2015) also prompted events characterised by significant change, the current study added an explicit request for valenced change. Secondly, although the present hypotheses regarding event valence rested upon Boucher and Scoboria's (2015) finding that emotional valence, via statistical control, did not alter their results, it is important to acknowledge that this item constitutes a crude estimate of event valence and stands in contrast to direct prompts to retrieve events begetting significant positive or negative personal change; that is, measurement of the emotional valence associated with events may be distinct from the selection of events based on the valence of change they are thought to have produced. Boucher and Scoboria (2015) also noted a positivity bias for past events, meaning they were generally associated with greater positive emotion during recall, however, using their event cue, it was also possible for the change characterising events to be considered neutral (i.e., not necessarily strongly positive or negative, just different). As a third methodological difference, participants in the current study were asked to retrieve the same event on two occasions, at least 10 days apart, which possibly explains why material impact, centrality, and importance ratings remained relatively impervious to mental focus manipulations in this study but not in Boucher and

Scoboria's (2015) study. Differences in event cues (i.e., in terms of allowances for default neutrality or skewed emotionality) and/or the frequency of retrieval prompts may therefore explain divergent findings. A repeated measures design with a 'non-valenced event cue' condition would be necessary to elucidate these effects.

Nevertheless, that positive events were associated with greater material impact, centrality, and importance ratings, compared to negative events, offers further support for both self-enhancement and self-coherence motives, in that positive transitions, and the material changes they produce, more favourably define (enhancement), and agree with (coherence), a generally rosy view of the current self.

Why did mental focus effects emerge for psychological impact but not material impact? This may relate to the fact that materially-based event attributions (e.g., changes in places frequented, things owned) involve more concrete, factual elements than psychologically-based appraisals (e.g., changes in attitude, sense of self), which are more abstract, and thus, more malleable in accordance with mental focus. In line with this idea, Boucher and Scoboria (2015) found mental focus effects to be greater for judgements of psychological impact compared to material impact. Related to their being bound by a greater degree of objectivity, perhaps appraisals of material impact become congealed with repeated retrieval, making them less changeable following mental focus manipulations at a later time, while (unbound) appraisals of psychological impact remain open to renegotiation. It would be interesting to investigate whether these factors could account for why overall material impact ratings were lower in the current study ($M = 3.05$) as compared to Boucher and Scoboria (2015, Study 1, $M = 3.52$) while psychological impact ratings were similar ($M = 3.92$ vs. $M = 3.87$, respectively). Also

noteworthy, ratings on event centrality and importance were near the scale ceilings, suggesting there may be an upper limit to reappraising the material components of more self-defining events. This would agree with Beike and Crone's (2012) suggestion that self-defining memories are tagged with fixed meaning that is stored with the memory, with the added caveat that *particular forms* of meaning (i.e., psychological impact) and particular valenced events (i.e., negative) may not adhere to this logic.

Possibly for similar reasons, ratings of how connected transitional events were to other life events did not vary according to mental focus or event valence, which disagrees with Boucher and Scoboria's (2015) findings. In addition to methodological differences already discussed, this finding may relate to the fact that valenced transitions, which are essentially self-defining, afford contrasting memories less "space" within the cognitive field (i.e., according to gestalt figure-ground principles; Duval, Silvia, & Lalwani, 2001); that is, these personally significant valenced transitions may be distinct amongst comparison set of prior experiences, which obscures estimates of the degree to which they are embedded within extended memory networks. Perceived connectedness may, therefore, constitute another component of meaning that remains fixed to, and stored with, personally salient valenced memories (Beike & Crone, 2012).

Contrasting events that vary in their personal salience (e.g., transitional/important vs. non-transitional/mundane) may further define the boundaries within which mental focus exerts its effects. It should be noted however, that previous research (Berntsen & Bohn, 2010; Rubin & Schulkind, 1997) suggests that a request to retrieve important (vs. mundane) events affords access to perceptually rich event representations experienced as emotional and consequential when they occurred (characteristics that make transitional

vs. non-transitional events differently suited to mental focus manipulations and assessments of emotional reference points).

Present Affect

Similar to findings for psychological impact and personality change, mental focus effects on negative affect were confined to the negative transition conditions; for these individuals, a coherence focus resulted in reports of lower negative affect relative to an experience focus. Findings did not support the anticipated moderating role of emotional reference point (i.e., whether emotions derived from thinking about what it was like to experience the event vs. its broader consequences), however, they agreed with research suggesting that a self-distanced view of negative past experiences produces less emotional distress compared to a self-immersed view (e.g., Ayduk & Kross, 2010; Kross & Ayduk, 2011). These authors contend that a self-distanced perspective allows the self that is contemplating an event to become psychologically detached from the self that has experienced it, which serves to reduce associated emotion. The inclusion of positive events in the current study, however, qualifies this assertion: In so far as self-distancing serves a “psychological removal function,” and to the extent self-distanced versus self-immersed perspectives operate likewise to coherence versus experience mental foci, respectively (which the current findings suggest), then we might expect positive affect to vary in accordance with mental focus for those who recalled positive transitions, however, the findings do not support this. Likewise to psychological impact and personality change, it appears that the negative affect associated with negative events is more receptive to available cognitive strategies for event representation (i.e., mental focus) relative to the positive affect that accompanies positive events, which does not

arouse such aversion, dissonance, and/or desire to resolve within the context of one's current self-view and life narrative.

The finding that levels of negative and positive affect coincided with positive and negative event conditions, respectively, while ratings of negative affect overall were lower than those for positive affect, supports the idea that negative events and associated affect are subject to increased cognitive management. It also agrees with research demonstrating that negative affect associated with events fades faster over time relative to positive affect in order to enhance the current self (Fading Affect Bias; Holmes, 1970; Walker, Vogl, & Thompson, 1977).

On the surface, it would appear that the findings for affect do not align with Libby and Eibach's (2011b) suggestion that one's currently operating self-theory or default assumption about an event (i.e., reference point for evoked emotion) should moderate the effects of imagery perspective (hence, mental focus) on emotion. However, upon further deconstruction of the methodologies used, the findings can be said to lend support, at least in part, for their view; that is, in formulating my hypotheses, I neglected to specify that the event valence manipulation was also a self-theory manipulation (i.e., change for the better vs. change for the worse), due in part to the fact that prior research has not considered such self-theories (but rather, self-change vs. self-stability, Libby & Eibach, 2011a; high self-esteem vs. low self-esteem, Libby et al., 2011). Recall that self-theories pertaining to change versus stability were used to explain the effects of self-distancing on the adaptive reconciliation of negatively charged events. That mental focus exerted effects on negative affect for negative, but not positive, events then suggests that it is not self-change per se that accounts for these previous findings (e.g., Ayduk & Kross, 2010;

Kross & Ayduk, 2009; Kross, Ayduk, & Mischel, 2005), but also the valence shift characterizing such change (decline vs. improvement). This points to an interesting study in which mental focus and event-type manipulations are crossed: mental focus (coherence vs. experience) by self-change (transitional vs. non-transitional) by event valence (positive vs. negative).

Due to the fact there were two possible moderating variables in the current study, where one was fixed (event valence) and the other was random (emotional referent), it is difficult to ascertain to what extent these methods appropriately addressed the hypothesis that individuals' reference points for evoked emotion alone would moderate the effects of mental focus on associated affect. Results concerning the role of emotional referent are also tenuous due to small and uneven group sizes, multiple control variables, and the fact that this item has not been validated via earlier research. A larger sample, hence greater statistical power, may elucidate whether one's emotional referent, together with a theory of valenced self-change, can inform current affect. Designs that employ an emotional referent manipulation or post-mental focus manipulation measures of self-change and emotional reference point (for important, but not necessarily transitional, events) would serve this end.

Furthermore, findings that those who employed an experience focus on a negative transition provided the highest average rating of negative affect relative to other groups, that those in the positive (vs. negative) event conditions reported greater positive affect, and that emotion tended to become more positive (and less negative) following the use of a coherence (vs. experience) focus at Time 2, suggests that some mental focus-by-event valence shifts may be more beneficial than others in terms of affect. Specifically, the

current findings suggest that shifts from negative-experience to negative-coherence, or from negative-experience to a positive event using either mental focus, would produce greater reductions in negative affect and/or greater increases in positive affect. A controlled within-subjects design would systematically address the interplay amongst repeated retrieval of valenced events and the boundaries within which mental focus shifting informs appraisals of impact and affect.

In any case, Libby and Eibach (2011b) contend that in order for a third-person imagery (hence, coherence focus) to promote adaptive coping, an adaptive framework must also be specified to guide the meaning-making and emotional reaction that occurs. Reasoning backwards from the current results, the framework appears to be this: A coherence (vs. experience) focus promotes appraisals of greater impact and self-change as a result of an event along with lower negative affect, but only if the event is characterized by change for the worse (self-theory). When the event is characterized by change for the better, the usefulness of a coherence focus is diminished or entirely unnecessary.

It is worthwhile to discuss the extent to which mental focus effects may be considered ‘adaptive’ per se given support for both self-enhancement and self-coherence motives in the current study. Self-enhancement, for instance, has been suggested to inspire “higher motivation, greater persistence, more effective performance...greater success” (Taylor & Brown, 1988, p. 199) and adaptive coping in terms of positive action-orientations in the face of challenge (Walker & Skowronski, 2009). Other research, however, indicates that self-enhancement can also lead to poor coping in terms of a lack of constructive thinking (Neckar, 2013). Further, Robins and Beer (2001) contend that

while self-enhancement produces short-term benefits (e.g., keeps people in a positive mood and fosters creative and productive work), it can also promote long-term costs (e.g., ego-involvement, social isolation, and lower academic success). Research pertaining to self-coherence, however, is clearer on its adaptive value. For instance, perceptions of self-continuity have been shown to predict individuals' ability to manage challenges, their interest in new opportunities (Iyer & Jetten, 2011), use of active coping styles (e.g., planning and taking action) instead of passive coping styles (e.g., denial; Smith, Wethington, & Zhan, 1996), and their overall psychological adjustment (e.g., in terms of self-esteem, general contentment, depression, and anxiety; Bigler, Greg, Neimeyer, & Brown, 2001). Finally, as exemplified by the self-reflection paradox (Kross & Ayduk, 2011), it is not simply *that* individuals engage in more reflective thought about negative experiences, but rather *how* they go about doing so, that informs healthy meaning making and emotion regulation. A coherence focus, then, constitutes an adaptive cognitive strategy in so far as it supports peoples' ability to explain how a past self and associated memory relate to their current self-concept and life story as a whole, even in the face of potentially illusory optimism, which in turn, reinforces their ability to cope with challenges and changes encountered in their everyday lives.

Within a clinical domain, where negative past transitions are likely to be the focus of therapeutic work, the current findings suggest that encouraging discussion or written reflection around how a negative experience (even one that remains emotionally intense over time) relates to one's accomplishments, personal relationships, self-concept, and other events within his or her life-story can induce a view that they have undergone significant psychological change as a result of that event while also reducing associated

negative affect, as compared to reflecting on the event without a such a model to guide the meaning making process (likened to rumination), or simply rehashing the details of the experience itself. Indeed, various effective therapies include conceptually similar forms of ‘psychological distancing’ strategies (e.g., Beck, 1970; Linehan, 1993; Resick et al., 2008), and many well-known theories regard the establishment and maintenance of an integrated self as integral to adaptive functioning and psychological well-being (e.g., self-psychology theory; Kohut, 1977; humanistic theory; Rogers, 1965; needs hierarchy theory; Maslow, 1998). This study, therefore, highlights how relatively simple cognitive strategies for autobiographical event representation can uniquely contribute to mental health outcomes.

Cognitive Emotion Regulation Strategies

Contrary to what might be predicted based on Cox and McAdams’ (2014) work, mental focus and personality change valence did not inform ratings on any cognitive emotion regulation strategies. There are a number of methodological differences to consider in interpreting these results. Firstly, Cox and McAdams (2014) directed participants to discuss the details of high-point and low-point events followed by their broader implications, likened to a shift from an experience focus to a coherence focus, whereas individuals in the current study were prompted to use one focus or the other. This suggests that mental focus shifting might matter in terms of the kind of meaning people derive when thinking about events and the cognitive emotion regulation strategies they predict. The assumption here is that while coherence and experience mental foci are thought to produce qualitatively distinct forms of meaning, their combination may

elucidate a meaning-making process by which adaptive versus maladaptive regulation strategies emerge.

Secondly, whereas Cox and McAdams (2014) coded negative and positive forms of meaning in their participants' narratives (informed by, Thorne, McLean, & Lawrence, 2004), the current study equated a coherence focus to Cox and McAdams' (2014) definition of meaning making in which "the narrator steps back from the episodic action of the experience and reflects upon the meaning of the episode with regard to the self and the world" (p. 67), and relied upon the personality change valence item (for better vs. worse) as continuous indicator of its valence. This differential reliance on qualitative versus quantitative measures of meaning likely implicates the degree to which findings for these constructs can be contrasted across studies.

Furthermore, the methods used by Cox and McAdams (2014) do not appropriately disentangle meaning making from narrative style. Indeed, as the present findings regarding the BIF illustrate, peoples' preferences for abstract (vs. concrete) descriptions can incite reports of greater change for the better, greater positive affect, and lower negative affect as a result of negative events. Moreover, higher preferences for abstraction were associated with lower tendencies to ruminate, blame oneself, and blame others, and greater positive reappraisal. Perhaps then, it is not valenced meaning making per se that predicts adaptive versus maladaptive cognitive emotion regulation strategies, but rather, it is peoples' trait-like autobiographical reasoning styles (e.g., Habermas & Bluck, 2000). Certainly, this would explain why "meaning making" predicted regulation strategies - also relatively stable styles (Garnefski et al., 2001) - two years later for Cox and McAdams (2014) but not within a single session according to retrieval

manipulations, as in the present study. Also, within the current research paradigm, the CERQ was placed at the end of the study, after multiple items prompting individuals to assess various phenomenological features, which may have further limited the degree to which cognitive emotion regulation strategies could be influenced by mental foci. Recall that a similar rationale was used to explain why the mental focus manipulation check item did not verify the manipulations. It would be worthwhile for future studies to consider the amount and content of items preceding the CERQ and mental focus check item, and in the case of the latter, to also evaluate written narratives according to relevant mental focus content.

In any case, due to the fact “meaning making” is such a broad concept that is measured in many different ways in the literature, in addition to the fact that some forms of meaning may vary as a function of retrieval context or individual characteristics (e.g., narrative style), a valuable research endeavor would be to deconstruct aspects of meaning and assess the degree to which meaning-making scales, coding schemes, narrative styles, and cognitive strategies for event representation (e.g., mental focus, imagery perspective, and self-distance) converge.

As a final note, in considering the effects of event valence on self-blame and need for acceptance, a familiar theme emerges. Specifically, that those who recalled a negative (vs. positive) event indicated that they assumed less responsibility for unpleasant experiences and felt a greater urge to try to accept them, agrees with the rationale for why mental focus effects on psychological impact, self-change, and negative affect were constrained to negative transition conditions: People appear to be more motivated to resolve negative events as compared to positive events.

Perceived Closure in the Reconciliation of Positive Versus Negative Events

Many studies examining the effects of self-distancing have focused on negative events that, at the time of retrieval, were considered to be unresolved and emotionally evocative (e.g., Auduk & Kross, 2010). Crawley (2010) has shown that “open” (i.e., unresolved) memories are generally more emotionally negative compared to “closed” (i.e., resolved) memories, which tend to be more emotionally positive. Therefore, the desire to resolve past experiences may have informed the selection of transitions in the current study, contributing to their being appraised as negative versus positive and to their disparate sensitivities to mental focus manipulations. That is, the reconciliation of events, via their susceptibility to retrieval manipulations, may not only depend on the degree to which they reflect poorly on the current self (self-enhancement motive), and the degree to which they disagree with current self-conceptions (self-coherence motive), but also on the degree to which a subjective resolution has been reached, and for negative events, a coherence (vs. experience) focus aptly lends itself to this purpose.

Using a similar experimental paradigm, Crawley (2010; Study 2) manipulated the imagery perspective participants used to describe “open” negative events and found that the use of third-person (vs. first-person) imagery resulted in these events being rated as significantly more closed, more discrepant from the current self, less relived, less intense, less physical, less emotionally negative, and more emotionally positive during recall. To the extent negative transitions in the current study were more “open” relative positive transitions, and mental foci operated likewise to imagery perspectives (experience focus/first-person imagery; coherence focus/third-person imagery; see discussion on *imagery perspective* below), then Crawley’s (2010) findings corroborate the present

results for perceived personality change, affect, and memory characteristics: A coherence (vs. experience) focus was associated with greater perceived self-change, lower negative affect, lower clarity, lower perceptual detail, lower feeling of reliving, and lower physical reaction during recall. Prospective research, then, could investigate the extent to which perceived closure informs the current results.

Ancillary Analyses

Imagery perspective. Contrary to what would be predicted by the self-enhancement motive (Sanitioso, 2008), event valence was not associated with imagery perspective ratings and, inconsistent with the self-coherence motive (McAdams, 1997; Vinitzky-Seroussi, 1998), perceived self-change as a result of the event did not inform ratings of imagery perspective. In line with prior work (D'Argembeau et al., 2003), however, both positive and negative events were reported to contain more first-person, as compared to third-person, imagery. Noteworthy, though previous research has demonstrated a close relationship amongst mental focus and imagery perspective (experience focus/first-person imagery; coherence focus/third-person imagery; e.g., Libby & Eibach, 2009, 2011a), mental focus was not found to influence imagery perspective ratings in the current study, likely due to methodological differences. For instance, Libby and Eibach (2011a) provided specific target events (e.g., high-school graduation) whereas the current study prompted individuals to select a valenced transition deriving from any point in their personal pasts - a more ecologically valid approach to studying the potential malleability of meaning for important past events, the salience of which is necessarily idiosyncratic (Brown & Lee, 2010). Imposing further restrictions on the sampling of events, therefore, runs counter to the aims of this research. Indeed, the

lack of mental focus effects on imagery perspective in the current study agrees with earlier work examining appraisals of transitional events (Boucher & Scoboria, 2015). Also, in line with Kross and Ayduk (2011), both greater use of third-person imagery and greater self-distancing were associated with lower feelings of re-experiencing, while a coherence focus resulted in reports of less reliving of the event relative to an experience focus.

Taken together, these findings, together with Crawley's (2010) findings regarding imagery perspective, lend credence to the idea that mental focus operates likewise to imagery perspective (coherence/third-person; experience/first-person) but not necessarily in accordance with it, for the reason that there are other potential determinants of imagery perspective at play (e.g., distance from the present, content, self-consistency; Libby & Eibach, 2011a).

Regarding the relationship amongst imagery perspective and self-distance, these constructs have been distinguished from one another on the basis of the direction of invoked meaning: visual imagery perspective is thought to be more aligned with bottom-up meaning-making processes whereas psychological perspective is thought to rely more so upon top-down meaning-making processes (Libby & Eibach, 2011b). To distinguish this claim from the same distinction made amongst visual imagery perspectives (first-person vs. third-person, respectively; Libby & Eibach, 2011b), it is conceivable that a self-distanced (vs. self-immersed) perspective entails the shifting of oneself as a bound psychological entity, complete with reflection, feeling, and general self-knowledge away from the experience of the event (rather than into it), whereas imagery perspective solely entails the shifting of visual mental imagery, which may or may not involve self-removal.

That is, the parsing of the Jamesian “I” and “Me” (James, 1890/1950) may be more explicit for self-distancing manipulations (e.g., “see the experience unfold through your own eyes as if it were happening to you again...understand the feelings you felt”; Kross et al., 2012, p. 569) relative to imagery perspective manipulations (e.g., “see the event from the same visual perspective as you originally did”; Libby et al., 2005, p. 55), the function of which is more implicit.

Despite these hypothesized differences, the strong relationship between imagery perspective and perceived self-distance when recalling events (first-person/self-immersion; third-person/self-distance) found in the present study is notable, for it serves to bridge the gap between two parallel but distinct lines of research: one primarily concerned with the social implications of visual imagery perspective (Libby & Eibach, 2011a; 2011b) and the other primarily concerned with the clinical implications of self-distancing (Kross & Ayduk, 2011). Crossing these literatures then, may inform the realms within which they may be applied, their potential differential usefulness (based on implicit versus explicit functions), and importantly, the mechanisms by which they operate.

Additional Considerations and Suggestions for Future Work

There are a few additional methodological considerations to address, if not to further situate the present findings, then to inspire future research. To begin, while the preservation of ecological validity was provided as a rationale for the current event cues, it is important to address potential confounds in using this approach. For instance, the relative ease of access to concrete versus abstract event elements has been suggested to depend, in part, on the age of the memory (i.e., when the event occurred; Bartlett, 1932;

Trope & Liberman, 2010; Wyer & Srull, 1986) and its valence (e.g., events characterized by pride vs. shame; D'Argembeau & Van der Linden, 2008), with objectively closer and positive memories being afforded more detail. In the current study, while there were no effects of valence on vividness, clarity, or perceptual details, negative events were dated to have occurred in the more distal past, were considered more difficult to picture, more complex, and felt like they lasted longer than positive events (this last point agrees with recent work showing that descriptions of negative experiences tend to include a sense that time has slowed down; Bluck, 2015). We might also consider the extent to which selected events are episodic (i.e., occurred on a specific day at a particular time and place in one's past). Though many studies employed this instruction, the current study along with Boucher and Scoboria (2015), found that events generally occurred over the course of many days to one month. Future research, therefore, may consider potential constraints on the utility of different mental foci in terms of the range of, and fluent access to, available details in memory. To limit these potential effects, while not neglecting the objectives of this research, subsequent work could request events within a specified time frame (e.g., within the past year).

Further, prior work has shown that memories tend to become more positive as people age (Kennedy, Mather, & Carstensen, 2004), which bears to mind the usefulness of longitudinal or cross-sectional research designs in assessing potential differences in the effectiveness of mental focus manipulations for valenced events. This also prompts questions about how the valence of the events when they occurred differs from their valence at retrieval (e.g., an event may have been experienced as negative at the time but is now regarded as a positive turning point). Though in the current study, participants

were prompted to select events based on *present* attributions of valence (i.e., based on appraisals of favourable vs. unfavourable event *outcomes*), it is worth acknowledging that a coherence focus arguably taps such attributions to a greater extent relative to an experience focus, which is necessarily tied to valence attributions at the time the event is thought to have occurred. Parsing apart how valence attributions evolve over time and how such shifts can inform mental focus effects on associated affect constitutes a fruitful area for future work.

Moreover, the finding that individual's subjective sense of when events occurred did not vary as a function of event valence irrespective of their objective temporal distance from the present disagrees with Temporal Self-Appraisal Theory, which suggests that positive events should be felt to have occurred closer to the present in order to preserve an enhanced view of the current self (Ross & Wilson, 2002; Wilson & Ross, 2001). Indeed, that individuals' subjective sense of an event's distance from the present did not differ according to event valence while objective distanced did, suggests that negative events were, in a sense, being subjectively 'pulled' closer to the present, perhaps for reasons relating to the apparent priority status they are afforded for cognitive and emotional reconciliation. Further delineating conditions in which appraisals of subjective temporal distance may not necessarily serve to enhance the present self, at least not in the way Temporal Self-Appraisal Theory predicts, would be an interesting research endeavour.

Finally, analyses of transition types in the current study suggest two interesting points. First, that it was possible for a single transition to carry different subjective valence attributions (e.g., entering university could have been construed as positive for

some and negative for others), speaks to the fallibility of relying on examiner evaluations of valence based on event types. It is worth stressing that the current research was not concerned with ‘objectively’ valenced (i.e., valenced by examiner standards, informed by generally agreed upon axioms of experience), nor was it concerned with memory accuracy; rather, it was individuals’ personal appraisals of events, which may or may not reflect reality or ‘objective’ estimates of valence. Secondly, individuals were noted to identify transitions that they experienced either directly or indirectly (e.g., own divorce vs. parents’ divorce), which suggests that although self-defining memories are, by definition, intrapersonal, they are also interpersonal in nature (Singer & Salovey, 1993); this accords with self and social functions of autobiographical memory (Bluck, Alea, Habermas, & Rubin, 2005). This is to say that the way individuals go about reconciling past transitional events involving others may not only inform their relationship to that event (i.e., in terms of meaning and emotion), but also their conceptions of, and interactions with, those relevant others - yet another stimulating focus for subsequent research.

CONCLUSION

People’s self-concepts are grounded in personally important autobiographical memories (Conway, 2001, 2005) and their ability to regulate memory-induced emotions is intricately tied to the construction of meaning (Cox & McAdams, 2014; Kross & Ayduk, 2011), which ultimately informs psychological functioning (e.g., Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; McAdams, 2001). Though individuals may be driven to maintain an enhanced and coherent view of the self during recall, they may not possess knowledge of how or when to appropriately apply particular cognitive “tools” already present within

their repertoire of strategies for autobiographical event representation. The current study reveals that a coherence (vs. experience) focus can induce appraisals of greater psychological impact and personality change as a result of an event along with less negative affect, but only if the event is characterized by self-decline (i.e., the relevant self-theory). When the event is characterized by self-improvement, a coherence focus becomes less necessary or wholly irrelevant. It appears, then, that negative events and associated negative affect are subject to increased cognitive management and are thus more receptive to available cognitive strategies (i.e., mental focus) relative to the positive affect that accompanies positive events. For negative transitional experiences, a coherence (vs. experience) focus then is thought to provide the cognitive means with which individuals can psychologically separate from the experiential self contained in the memory while integrating the discrepant event within an overarching conceptual self-view, thereby producing lower ratings of negative affect.

It will be important for future work to identify additional self-theories, and combinations thereof, that serve to qualify mental focus effects on present affect and attributions of event meaning, and to further define the limits within which mental focus may exert effects. By investigating the relative malleability of meaning attributions and present affect during the recall of positive and negative transitions, this study elucidates one such framework, suggests the simultaneous operation of self-enhancement and self-coherence motives, supports the integration of different models concerning affect, draws a connection amongst parallel but distinct lines of research (i.e., imagery perspective and self-distance literatures), and points to important factors to consider in clinical research and practice.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Event Cue Instructions

Positive Transition

Please identify a personally important positive past transition. A positive transition is an event that has produced some form of positive or favourable change in you and your life.

The transitional event can come from any point in your past. It can deal with something that happened recently or something that happened many years ago, however, it must be an event that you were involved in or witnessed firsthand and one that occurred at a particular time and place.

Once you have identified your positive transitional event, please indicate what it is here:

Negative Transition

Please identify a personally important negative past transition. A negative transition is an event that has produced some form of negative or unfavourable change in you and your life.

The transitional event can come from any point in your past. It can deal with something that happened recently or something that happened many years ago, however, it must be an event that you were involved in or witnessed firsthand and one that occurred at a particular time and place.

Once you have identified your negative transitional event, please indicate what it is here:

Appendix B

Reference Point for Evoked Emotion (adapted from Libby & Eibach, 2011a, 2011b)

Your emotional reaction may derive mostly from thinking about what it was like to experience the event directly, as if you are actually there, *OR* your emotional reaction may derive mostly from thinking about the broader consequences or implications of the event to you and your life. Please select the *one option* that best captures the origin of your emotions:

My emotions mostly result from thinking about what it was like to experience the event.

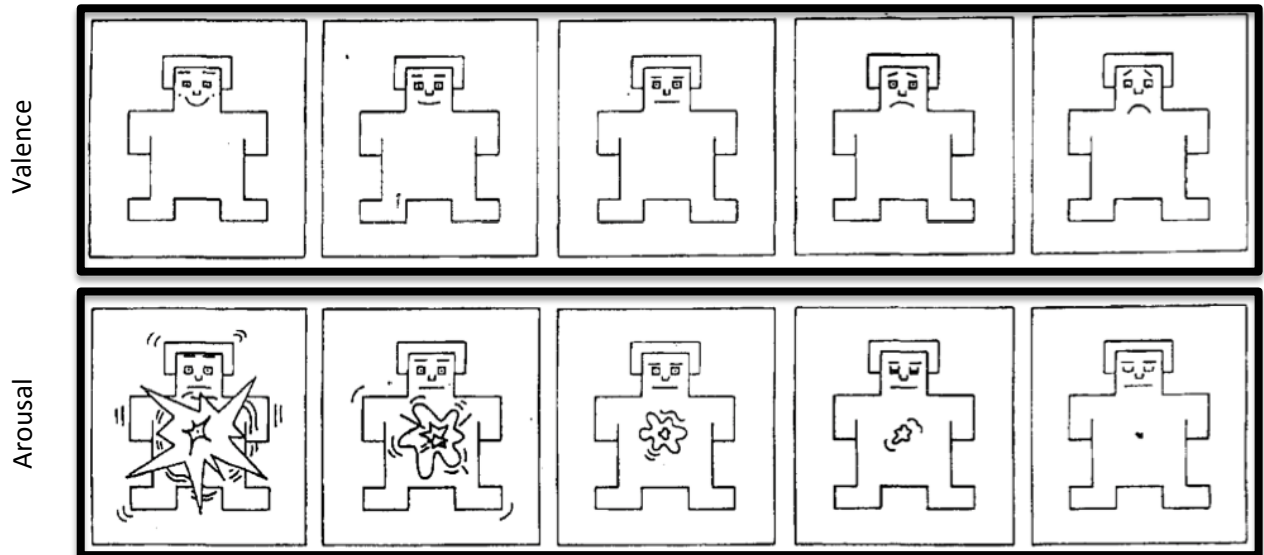
My emotions mostly result from thinking about the broader consequences/implications of the event.

Using the scale below, please indicate the degree to which your emotions result from the thoughts you indicated (1 = *a little*, 3 = *some*, 5 = *a lot*).

Appendix C

The Self Assessment Mannequin (SAM; Bradley & Lang, 1994)

On each row below, place the slider under one figure or between two figures that accurately portray how you are feeling today.



Appendix D

Mental Focus Manipulation Instructions (adapted from Libby & Eibach, 2011a)

(Screen 1) Approximately 2 weeks ago, you identified a personally important (*negative/positive*) event. The event you identified is as follows: (*participant will be presented with the cue word he/she provided at Time 1 and asked to confirm that it is correct*). Consider the event you have identified. When answering the following questions, please regard this same event.

Experience Manipulation Instructions

(Screen 2) Now focus on the concrete details of your event. That is, think about what it was like to experience the event directly as if you are actually there again. For example, where did this event take place? What specific actions (e.g., drove, walked, sat, etc.) did you engage in? What did you see? What did you hear? What did you smell? What objects and what people were involved?

At this time, we are NOT interested in what the event means to you and we are NOT interested in the larger significance of the event. We are ONLY interested in the concrete details of what your event entailed, so please try to be as concrete as you can in describing the actual, specific details of the event you are recalling. Please use the next 5 to 7 minutes to describe the concrete details of your event below.

Coherence Manipulation Instructions

(Screen 2) Now focus on the broader significance of your event. For example, how does this event relate to your previous experiences, accomplishments, and personal relationships? How does this event relate to your future? What are the implications of this event? What is the meaning of this event in terms of your life as a whole and yourself as a person?

At this time, we are NOT interested in the details of the specific actions that you engaged in and we are NOT interested in the concrete details of what the event entailed. We are ONLY interested in the broad meaning of your event for yourself and your life, so please focus on the larger meaning of the event you are recalling. Please use the next 5 to 7 minutes to describe the broader significance of your event below.

Appendix E

The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegan, 1988)

This scale consists of a number of words that describe different feelings and emotions. Read each item and then mark the appropriate answer in the space next to that word. Indicate to what extent [*the 'Moment' time instruction will be inserted here*]. Use the scale to record your answers.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|--------------------------------|-----------------|------------|---------------|-----------|
| Very slightly or not at all | A little | Moderately | Quite a bit | Extremely |
| | ___interested | | ___irritable | |
| | ___distressed | | ___alert | |
| | ___excited | | ___ashamed | |
| | ___upset | | ___inspired | |
| | ___strong | | ___nervous | |
| | ___guilty | | ___determined | |
| | ___scared | | ___attentive | |
| | ___hostile | | ___jittery | |
| | ___enthusiastic | | ___active | |
| | ___proud | | ___afraid | |

The following time instructions have been used with the PANAS:

| | |
|----------------|--|
| Moment | You feel this way right now, that is, at the present moment. |
| Today | You have felt this way today. |
| Past few days | You have felt this way during the past few days. |
| Week | You have felt this way during the past week. |
| Past few weeks | You have felt this way during the past few weeks. |
| Year | You have felt this way during the past year. |
| General | You generally feel this way, that is, how you feel on the average. |

Appendix F

Transitional Impact Scale (TIS-12; Svob, Brown, Reddon, Uzer, & Lee, 2013)

Carefully consider the event you have described. In assessing your life after the event, rate the degree to which the following statements were true of your experience. The scale ranges from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 5 (*completely agree*). If your experience falls somewhere in between complete disagreement and agreement, please indicate this by choosing a value between 1 and 5 that most closely reflected your experience.

(Material Subscale)

1. This event has changed the places where I hang out.
2. This event has changed the things I own.
3. This event has changed my material circumstances.
4. This event has changed the activities I engage in.
5. This event has changed the people I spend time with.
6. This event has changed where I live.

(Psychological Subscale)

7. This event has changed my attitudes.
8. This event has changed the way I think about things.
9. This event has impacted my emotional responses.
10. This event has changed my sense of self.
11. This event has impacted me psychologically.
12. This event has influenced my understanding of right and wrong.

Appendix G

The Centrality of Event Scale (CES; Berntsen & Rubin, 2006)

Answer the following questions in an honest and sincere way, by selecting a number from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 5 (*totally agree*).

1. I feel this event has become part of my identity.
2. I feel that this event has become a central part of my life story.
3. This event has become a reference point for the way I understand myself and the world.
4. This event has colored the way I think and feel about other experiences.
5. This event permanently changed my life.
6. I often think about the effects this event will have on my future.
7. This event was a turning point in my life.

Appendix H

Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (CERQ; Garnefski et al., 2001)

Everyone gets confronted with negative or unpleasant events now and then and everyone responds to them in their own way. By the following questions, you are asked to indicate what you generally think when you experience negative or unpleasant events, by selecting a number from 1 (*almost never*) to 5 (*almost always*).

Self-Blame Subscale (survey numbers 1, 10, 19, 28):

1. I feel that I am the one to blame for it
2. I feel that I am the one who is responsible for what has happened
3. I think about the mistakes I have made in this matter
4. I think that basically the cause must lie within myself

Acceptance Subscale (survey numbers 2, 11, 20, 29):

5. I think that I have to accept that this has happened
6. I think that I have to accept the situation
7. I think that I cannot change anything about it
8. I think that I must learn to live with it

Focus on Thought/Rumination Subscale (survey numbers 3, 12, 21, 30):

9. I often think about how I feel about what I have experienced
10. I am preoccupied with what I think and feel about what I have experienced
11. I want to understand why I feel the way I do about what I have experienced
12. I dwell upon the feelings the situation has evoked in me

Positive Refocusing Subscale (survey numbers 4, 13, 22, 31):

13. I think of nicer things than what I have experienced
14. I think of pleasant things that have nothing to do with it
15. I think of something nice instead of what has happened
16. I think about pleasant experiences

Refocus on Planning Subscale (survey numbers 5, 14, 23, 32):

17. I think of what I can do best
18. I think about how I can best cope with the situation
19. I think about how to change the situation
20. I think about a plan of what I can do best

Positive Reappraisal Subscale (survey numbers 6, 15, 24, 33):

- 21. I think I can learn something from the situation
- 22. I think that I can become a stronger person as a result of what has happened
- 23. I think that the situation also has its positive sides
- 24. I look for the positive side to the matter

Putting into Perspective Subscale (survey numbers 7, 16, 25, 34):

- 25. I think that it all could have been much worse
- 26. I think that other people go through much worse experiences
- 27. I think that it hasn't been too bad compared to other things
- 28. I tell myself that there are worse things in life

Catastrophizing Subscale (survey numbers 8, 17, 26, 35):

- 29. I often think that what I have experienced is much worse than what others have experienced
- 30. I keep thinking about how terrible it is what I have experienced
- 31. I often think that what I have experienced is the worst that can happen to a person
- 32. I continually think how horrible the situation has been

Blaming Others Subscale (survey numbers 9, 18, 27, 36):

- 33. I feel that others are to blame for it
- 34. I feel that others are responsible for what has happened
- 35. I think about the mistakes others have made in this matter
- 36. I feel that basically the cause lies with others

Appendix I

Other Memory Characteristics

Imagery perspective, subjective temporal distance, and difficulty picturing items are adapted from Libby and Eibach (2011a):

(Imagery Perspective) Some images you may see from the first-person perspective, which means you see the event from the same visual perspective that you originally did. In other words, in your mind you are looking out at your surroundings through your own eyes.

Some images you may see from the third-person perspective, which means you see the event from an observer's visual perspective. In other words, in your mind you can actually see yourself, as well as your surroundings.

Indicate the relative proportion of images experienced from each perspective while describing your event previously. (1 = *All first-person images [from my own eyes]*; 8 = *All third-person images [from an observer's eyes]*).

(Subjective Temporal Distance) Regardless of when events actually occurred in the past, sometimes they feel very far away, while other times they feel very close almost like yesterday. As you think about it right now, how far away does the event you recalled FEEL to you? (0 = *Like yesterday*; 10 = *The very distant past*).

(Difficulty Picturing) How difficult was it for you to picture this event? (1 = *Not at all difficult*; 7 = *Very difficult*).

An index of objective temporal distance will be calculated using the participant's present age and estimated age at the time of the event (adapted from Berntsen & Bohn, 2010):

(Age at Event) How old were you when your transitional event took place? (*Estimate age in years*).

(Days Ago) If you indicated your current age in the previous question, how many days from today is the event in the past? (*Estimate time in days*).

(Current Age) What is your current age?

Items assessing recollective aspects of memories are adapted from Berntsen and Bohn (2010), Johnson, Foley, Suengas, and Raye (1988), Rubin, Schrauf, and Greenberg (2003):

(Emotional Valence) The emotions I have when I recall the episode are (-3 = *Extremely negative*; 3 = *Extremely positive*).

(Emotional Intensity) As I am thinking about this event now, my feelings are (1 = *Not intense*; 7 = *Very intense*).

(Vividness) When describing this event, it was vivid in my mind (1 = *Not at all*; 7 = *To a very high degree*).

(Perceptual Detail) When I thought of this event, I could see and hear in my mind what took place (1 = *Not at all*; 7 = *To a very high degree*).

(Re-Experience) When recalling this event, it was as if I was re-experiencing it (1 = *Not at all*; 7 = *To a very high degree*).

(Feeling of Reliving) As I remember the event, I feel as though I am reliving the original event (1 = *Not at all*; 7 = *Very much*).

(Mental Time Travel) As I thought about this event, I felt that I traveled back to the time when it happened, that I was a subject in it, rather than an outside observer tied to the present (1 = *Not at all*; 7 = *Very much*).

(Clarity of Location) When I think about this event, the location where the event takes place is (1 = *Vague*; 7 = *Clear/distinct*).

(Clarity of Objects) When I think about this event, the relative spatial arrangement of objects is (1 = *Vague*; 7 = *Clear/distinct*).

(Clarity of People) When I think about this event, the relative spatial arrangement of people in my memory is (1 = *Vague*; 7 = *Clear/distinct*).

(Narrative Coherence) As I thought about this event, it came to me in words or in pictures as a coherent story or episode and not as isolated scenes, facts, or thoughts (1 = *Not at all*; 7 = *Coherent story*).

(Thought/Talked) Since it happened, I have thought and talked a lot about this

episode (1 = *Not at all*; 7 = *Very often*).

(Reaction) I had a physical/bodily reaction to the memory – for example, by talking to myself, smiling, crying, shivering, palpitation, laughing, etc. (1 = *Not at all*; 7 = *To a very high degree*).

(Emotional Re-experience) As I remember the event, I can feel now the emotions that I felt then (1 = *Not at all*; 7 = *As clearly as if it were happening right now*).

(Importance) This event is important to my life (1 – *Not at all*; 7 = *To a very high degree*).

(Connectedness) As I think about this event, it is connected with other events (1 = *Not at all*; 7 = *Very much*).

An item assessing the extent of experiential self-immersion versus distancing is derived from Ayduk and Kross (2010):

(Self-Distance/Immersion) As you ponder your thoughts and feelings about your experience, indicate the extent to which you adopt an immersed perspective and see your event replay through your own eyes versus a distanced perspective and see the event unfold as an observer: (1 = *Predominantly my own eyes [immersed perspective]*, 7 = *Predominantly the eyes of an observer [distanced perspective]*).

Items assessing event duration and serving a response consistency checks are derived from Boucher and Scoboria (2015):

(Objective Event Duration) How long did your remembered event last?

On one specific day.

Over the course of many days.

Over the course of one month.

Over the course of many months and longer.

(TIS-Material Check) The way I lived, carried out activities and engaged with others before this event is _____ compared to after this event (1 = *Almost entirely the same*; 5 = *Almost entirely different*).

(TIS-Psychological Check) The way I thought or felt about myself and how I understood the world before this event is _____ compared to my life after this event (1 = *Almost entirely the same*; 5 = *Almost entirely different*).

Appendix J

Behavioural Identification Form (BIF; Vallacher & Wegner, 1985)

Any behavior can be identified in many ways. For example, one person might describe a behavior as "typing a paper," while another might describe the behavior as "pushing keys." Yet another person might describe the behavior as "expressing thoughts." We are interested in your personal preferences for how a number of different behaviors should be described. On the following pages you will find several different behaviors listed. After each behavior will be two choices of different ways in which the behavior might be identified. Here is an example:

1. Attending class
 - a. sitting in a chair
 - b. looking at the blackboard

Your task is to choose the identification, *a* or *b*, that best describes the behavior for you. *Simply select one identification statement for each pair.* Of course, there are no right or wrong answers. People differ in their preferences for the different behavior descriptions, and we are interested in your personal preferences. Be sure to select your choice for each behavior. Remember, choose the description that *you personally believe* is more appropriate in each pair.

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. Making a list <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Getting organized^ab. Writing things down | 5. Picking an apple <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Getting something to eat^ab. Pulling an apple off a branch |
| 2. Reading <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Following lines of printb. Gaining knowledge^a | 6. Chopping down a tree <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Wielding an axeb. Getting firewood^a |
| 3. Joining the Army <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Helping the Nation's defense^ab. Signing up | 7. Measuring a room for carpeting <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Getting ready to remodel^ab. Using a yard stick |
| 4. Washing clothes <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Removing odors from clothes^ab. Putting clothes into the machine | 8. Cleaning the house <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Showing one's cleanliness^ab. Vacuuming the floor |

9. Painting a room
 a. Applying brush strokes
 b. Making the room look fresh^a
10. Paying the rent
 a. Maintaining a place to live^a
 b. Writing a check
11. Caring for houseplants
 a. Watering plants
 b. Making the room look nice^a
12. Locking a door
 a. Putting a key in the lock
 b. Securing the house^a
13. Voting
 a. Influencing the election^a
 b. Marking a ballot
14. Climbing a tree
 a. Getting a good view^a
 b. Holding on to branches
15. Filling out a personality test
 a. Answering questions
 b. Revealing what you're like^a
16. Toothbrushing
 a. Preventing tooth decay^a
 b. Moving a brush around in one's mouth
17. Taking a test
 a. Answering questions
 b. Showing one's knowledge^a
18. Greeting someone
 a. Saying hello
 b. Showing friendliness^a
19. Resisting temptation
 a. Saying "no"
 b. Showing moral courage^a
20. Eating
 a. Getting nutrition^a
 b. Chewing and swallowing
21. Growing a garden
 a. Planting seeds
 b. Getting fresh vegetables^a
22. Traveling by car
 a. Following a map
 b. Seeing countryside^a
23. Having a cavity filled
 a. Protecting your teeth^a
 b. Going to the dentist
24. Talking to a child
 a. Teaching a child something^a
 b. Using simple words
25. Pushing a doorbell
 a. Moving a finger
 b. Seeing if someone's home^a

Note. ^a represents the abstract response option.

Appendix K

Manipulation Check Items

Both event valence and mental focus manipulation check items are derived from Libby and Eibach (2011a) and read as follows:

(Personality Change) As a result of this event I have changed as a person (1 = *Not at all. I am the same now as I was before this event*; 8 = *Completely. I am completely different now than I was before this event*).

(Personality Change Valence) If you have indicated that you have changed as a result of this event, how have you changed? (1 = *Entirely for the worse*; 8 = *Entirely for the better*).

(Mental Focus Check) When describing your event earlier, you may have focused more on what it was like to experience the event directly, for example, by describing the sights, sounds, and smells you experienced and/or your thoughts and feelings during the event.

OR, you may have focused more on analyzing the meaning of the event in your life, for example, by explaining the broader significance of the event, what it says about your personality and/or goals, how it connects to other events in your life, and/or what the consequences were or are. Please indicate the focus of your thoughts using the scale below: (1 = *Focused completely on what it was like to experience the event, not at all on analyzing the event*; 8 = *Focused completely on analyzing the event, not at all on what it was like to experience the event*).

Appendix L

Questions Regarding Demographics

(Current Age) What is your current age? _____

(Gender) What is your gender?

Female

Male

Other (please specify): _____

(Ethnic Background) What is your ethnic background?

Black or African

Asian

Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

White or Caucasian

Native

Hispanic or Latino

Multiracial

Decline to respond

Other (please specify): _____

(Academic major) What is your academic major? _____

(Academic year) What is your current academic year?

First year

Second year

Third year

Fourth year

Other (please specify): _____

Appendix M

Open-Ended Questions Following Participation in the Study

(Unstructured Event Description) Earlier, you were asked to describe some aspects of your transitional event. If you wish to provide additional information, perhaps about what it was like to experience your event and/or what your event means to you and your life, you may take some time to write about it here.

(Feedback about the Study) If you wish to leave any comments, questions, or concerns about your experience as a participant in this study, please feel free to do so here. Your feedback is greatly appreciated.

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