
Threat, self and dementia: evidence from social psychology



Richard Cheston, April 13th 2022.

Centre for Dementia, University of Nottingham

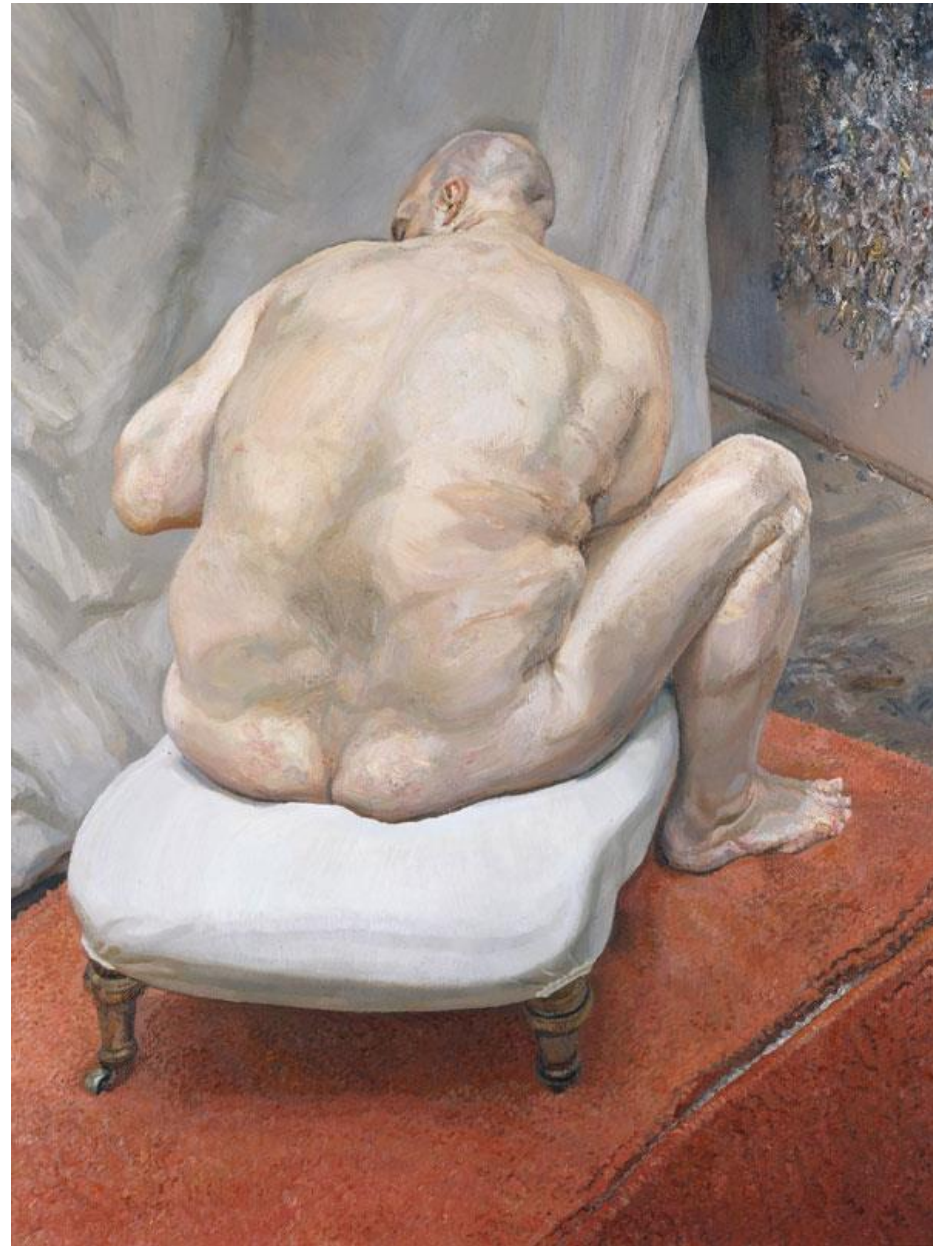
The Card
Players
(Cezanne,
1892)



Walking
Man
(Alberto
Giacometti,
1960)



Naked Man –
Back view
(Lucian
Freud, 1992)



Jean Béraud – *After the Misdeed*



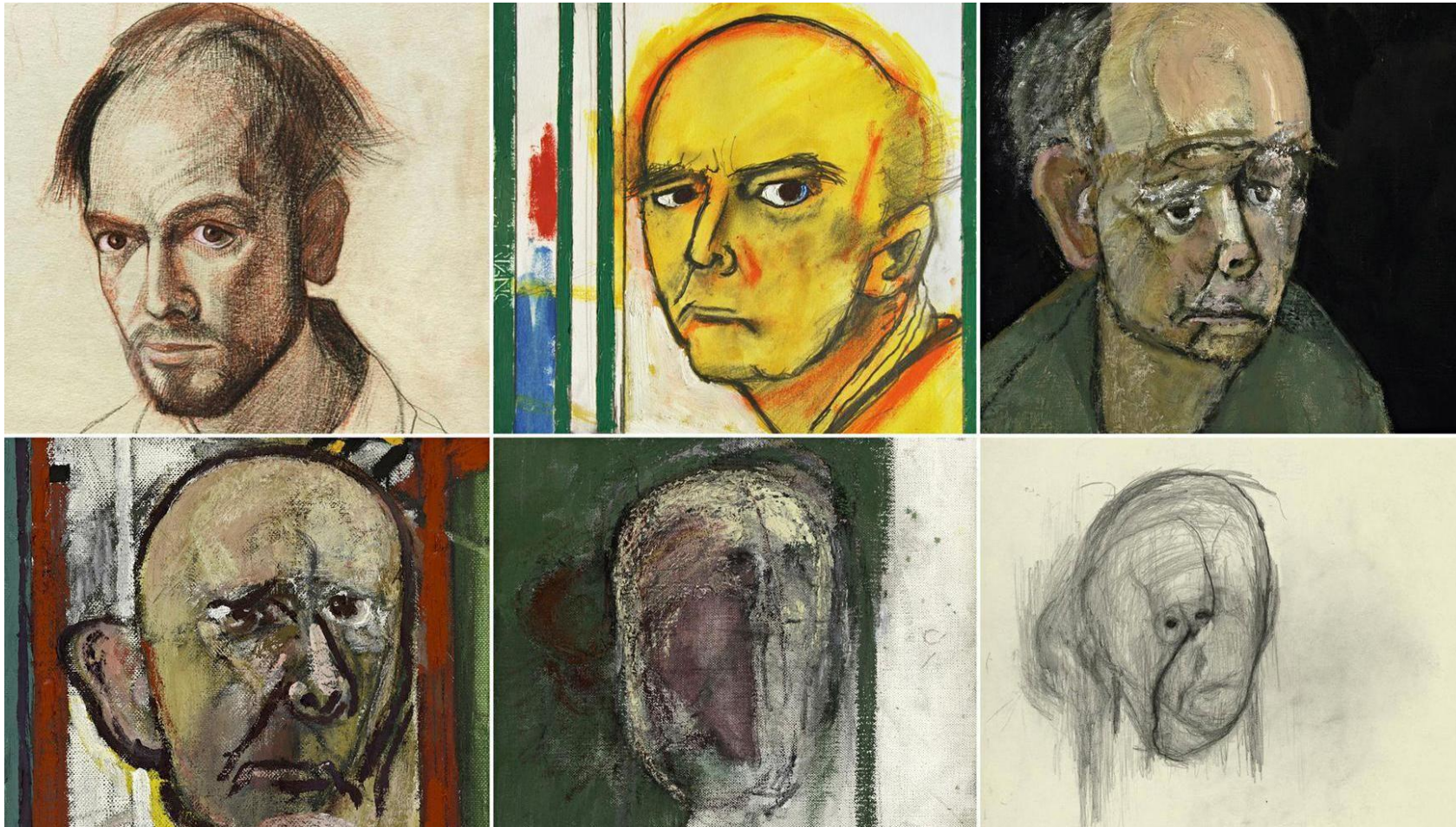
Portrait of
Pope
Innocent X
(Velazquez,
1650)



Study after
Velazquez's
Portrait of
Pope
Innocent X
(Francis
Bacon, 1953)



William Utermohlen: self-portraits



On the creation of his self portraits

[Dementia] makes me anxious because I like to produce good work and I know good work, but it's just so sad when you feel you cannot do it ... It was in sense of opportunity to have something so interesting to happen to you ... You have to approach something like this positively and throw yourself into it ... It's not fighting back, you can't fight it. But I wanted to understand what was happening to me in the only way I can.

William Utermohlen, 2001 interview with Margaret Discroll (from Wikipedia)



“Oh God”

“I as good as lost myself”

“I have lost myself”

“I am lost”

Frau Auguste Deter, 1901

First research theme:

If dementia represents an existential threat – one that threatens one's being - then how does this affect people who are living with dementia?

Lab based studies of recall for threatening statements

- **Terror Management Theory** - conflict between the desire to live and the knowledge that we will die creates anxiety
- This distress triggers intra-psychic processes that minimize threat to self
- Does this occur for people living with dementia?
- If so, what relationship does this have to clinical issues – e.g., adjustment and acceptance?

Selective forgetting of self-threatening statements: Mnemic neglect for dementia information in people with mild dementia

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Objective: We tested whether people with dementia manifest selective forgetting for self-threatening information, the mnemic neglect effect (MNE). This selective forgetting is observed among healthy adults in the recall, but not the recognition, of self-threatening feedback.

Methods: Sixty-four statements about dementia were rated for their level of negativity by 280 staff and students at University of the West of England. The 12 statements rated as most negative and the 12 statements rated as least negative were then read to 62 people with dementia. Participants were randomized to 1 of 2 conditions with the statements referring either to self or to another person. High-negativity and self-referent statements had strong threat potential. Participants recalled the statements and then completed a recognition task, which consisted of the 24 previously read statements and 24 new statements.

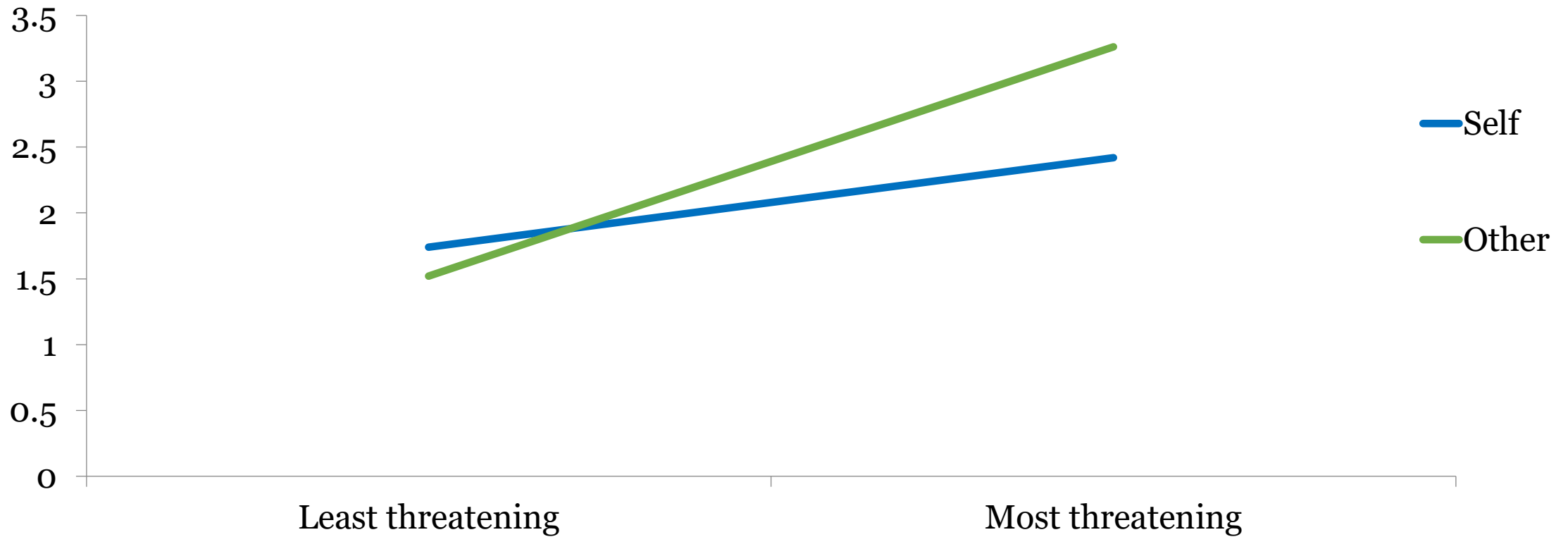
- Generated 12 highly threatening statements about dementia:
 - *“The illness may make you/ Chris feel confused”*
 - *“Your/ Chris’ illness is a progressive disease”*
- Plus 12 less threatening statements:
 - *“Your/ Chris’ illness doesn't change who he is/ you are”*
 - *“In the illness, proteins can build up inside your/ Chris’ brain”*
- 70 participants with dementia (43 had Alzheimer’s, 13 vascular and 12 mixed dementia) – average age 80 with mild cognitive impairment
- Randomised to recall statements about Chris or Self

We hypothesised
that:

For the most threatening information, recall
will be better when it is about Chris than
about self

For the least threatening information, there
will be no difference in recall between Chris
and self

Recall of dementia statements by level of threat



Results

Significant interaction between conditions (Self/Chris) and level of threat (least/most threatening).

No difference between recall of least threatening items

Significantly more threatening descriptions of dementia being recalled in the Chris than the self condition

Intrusion errors also protected self against threat

TMT and dementia

- When information about dementia relates directly to the person, then this can threaten self – recall is protective
- An analogue study – overlap between recall of statements and adjustment?
- *Replicated with people without dementia* - MNE present for older, but not younger, participants (Cheston et al., 2022)

Second research theme:

If dementia represents an existential threat – one that threatens one's being - then can we help people living with dementia to manage this terror more effectively?

What is a nostalgic memory?

- Isn't just any memory of the past
- Or any autobiographical memory
- It's a memory of an atypical event with the important people in our lives that helps us to feel better about ourselves, reminds us of who we are and of what life means

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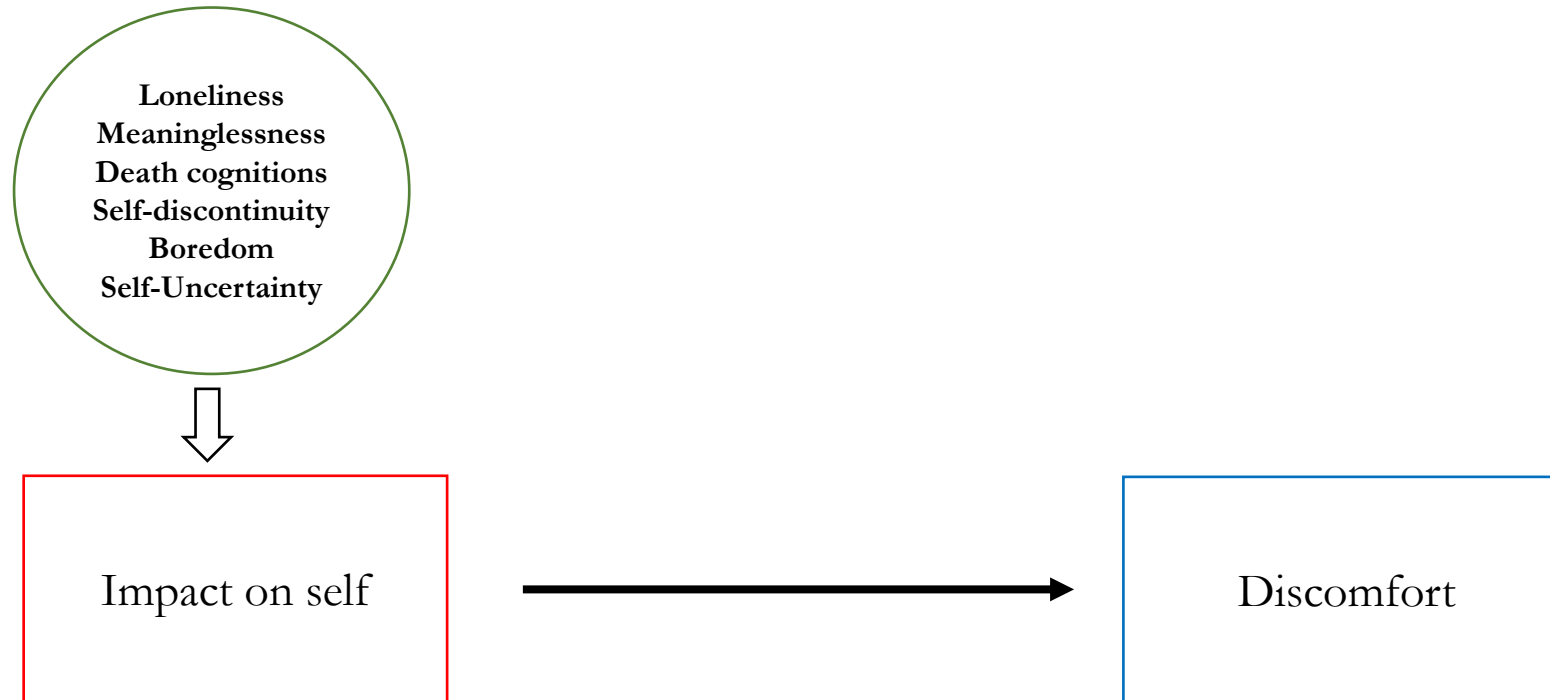


Importantly – my nostalgic, meaning giving memories with the important people in my life will be different to anyone else's.

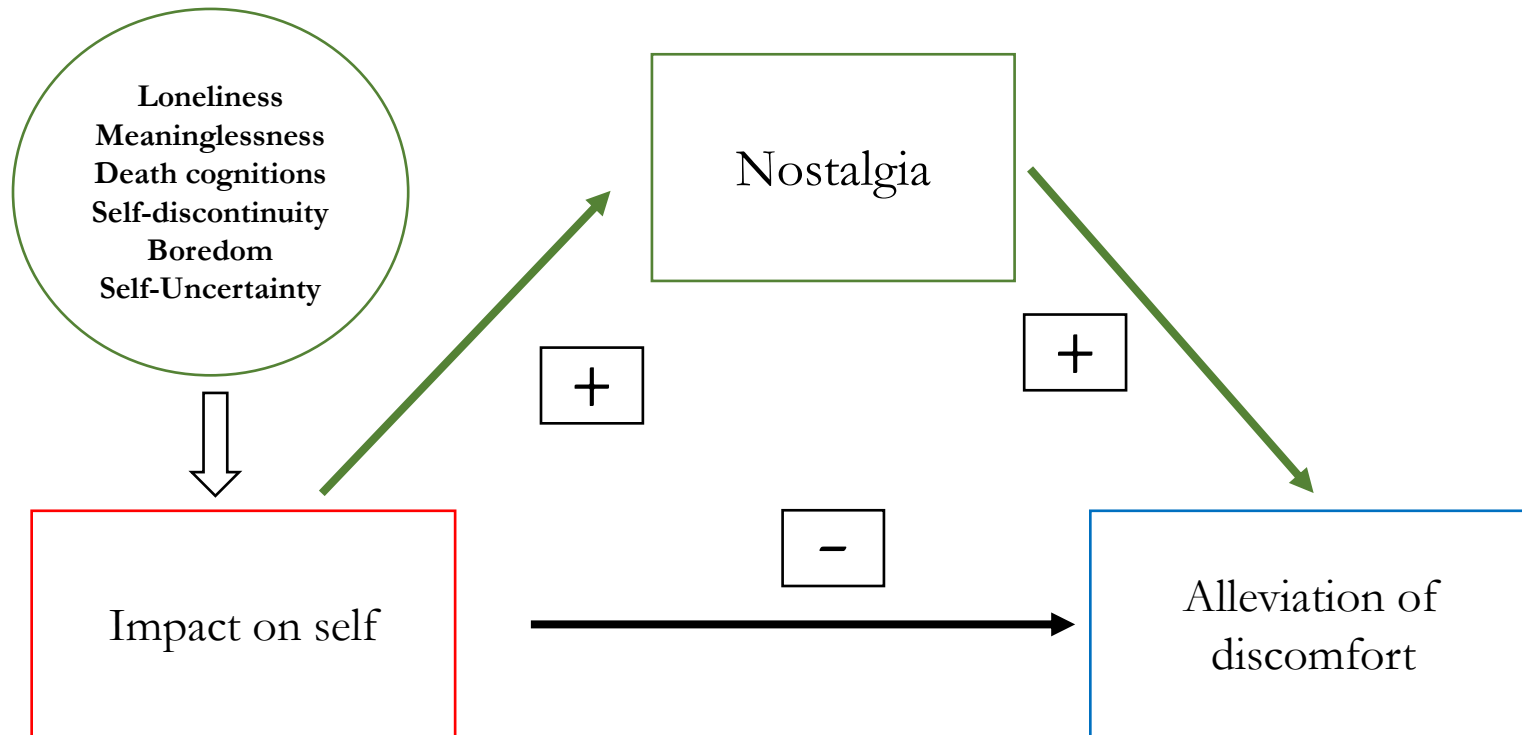
Memories provoke different responses



Regulatory Model: The Homeostatic Function of Nostalgia



Regulatory Model: The Homeostatic Function of Nostalgia



Inducing nostalgia for people with dementia

- Continued collaboration with Constantine Sedikides and Tim Wildschut
- *According to the New Oxford English Dictionary, nostalgia is defined as a 'sentimental longing for the past.' Please bring to mind a nostalgic event in your life. Specifically, try to think of a past event that makes you feel most nostalgic. Bring this nostalgic experience to mind. Immerse yourself in the nostalgic experience. How does it make you feel? Please spend a couple of minutes thinking about how it makes you feel. Please describe this nostalgic event (i.e., describe the experience)."*
- Other triggers can include music, smells, photographs, places

Three research questions

1. What sorts of memories are nostalgia for people living with dementia?
2. What impact does having a nostalgic memory (compared to another memory) have on people with dementia?
3. Does this help people to remember more about their dementia?

The Content of Nostalgic Memories Among People Living with Dementia

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Sanda Ismail¹, Emily Dodd¹,
Gary Christopher¹, Tim Wildschut², Constantine Sedikides²,
and Richard Cheston¹

Abstract

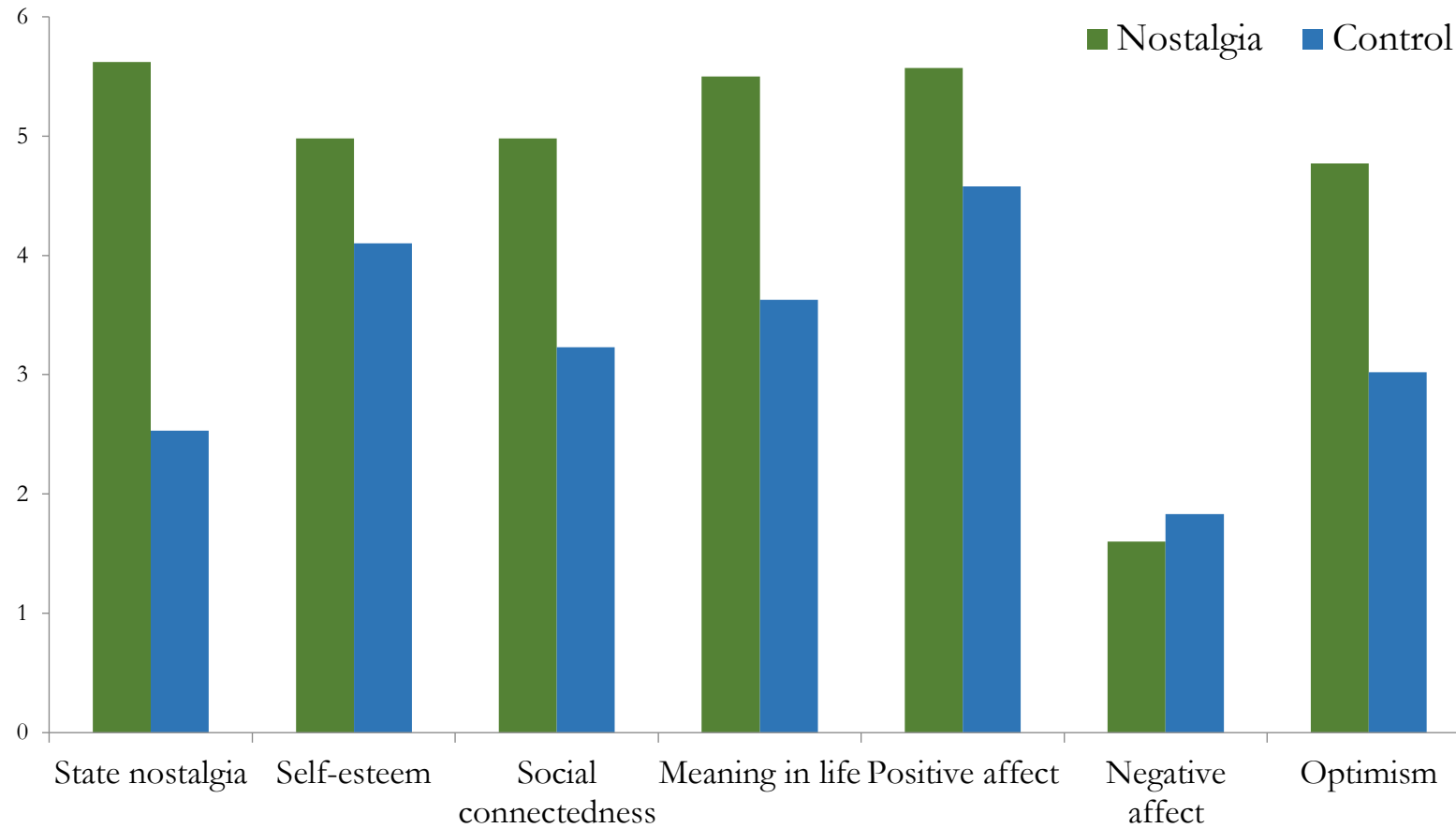
Although dementia may affect the reliability of autobiographical memories, the psychological properties of nostalgic memories may be preserved. We compared the content of nostalgic ($n = 36$) and ordinary ($n = 31$) narratives of 67 participants living with dementia. Narratives were rated according to their self-oriented, social, and existential properties, as well as their affective content. Social properties and affective content were assessed using a linguistic word count procedure. Compared to the ordinary narratives described in the control condition, nostalgic narratives described a typical events, expressed more positive affect, and had more expressions of self-esteem and self-continuity. They were also rated higher on companionship, connectedness and the closeness of relationships, and reflected life as being meaningful. Despite their cognitive impairment, people living with dementia experience nostalgia in similar ways to cognitively healthy adults, with their nostalgic narratives containing self-oriented, social, and existential properties.

Keywords

Alzheimer's disease, autobiographical memory, meaning in life, self-continuity, social connectedness, self-esteem

- Ismail et al. (2020) - compared the content of nostalgic ($n = 36$) and ordinary narratives ($n = 31$) of participants living with dementia.
- Blind rating: Compared to control narratives, nostalgic narratives described **atypical events**, expressed **more positive affect** and had **more expressions of self-esteem and self-continuity**. They were also rated higher on **companionship, connectedness and the closeness of relationships, and reflected life as being meaningful**.
- The content of nostalgic memories of people with dementia are the same as for those without dementia

Nostalgic memories have a different **effect** (Ismail et al., 2018, study 2)



Psychological and Mnemonic Benefits of Nostalgia for People with Dementia

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Abstract

Background: Studies with non-clinical populations show that nostalgia increases psychological resources, such as self-esteem and social connectedness.

Objectives: Our objectives were to find out if the benefits of nostalgia in non-clinical populations generalize to people with dementia and if nostalgia facilitates recall of dementia-related information.

Methods: All three experiments recruited participants with mild or moderate levels of dementia. Experiment 1 tested whether nostalgia (compared to control) enhances psychological resources among 27 participants. Experiment 2 used music to induce nostalgia (compared to control) in 29 participants. Experiment 3 compared recall for self-referent dementia statements among 50 participants randomized to either a nostalgia or control condition. Findings across experiments were synthesized with integrative data analysis.

Results: Nostalgia (compared to control) significantly increased self-reported social connectedness, meaning in life, self-continuity, optimism, self-esteem, and positive (but not negative) affect (Experiments 1–3). Compared to controls, nostalgic participants also recalled significantly more self-referent dementia-related information (Experiment 3).

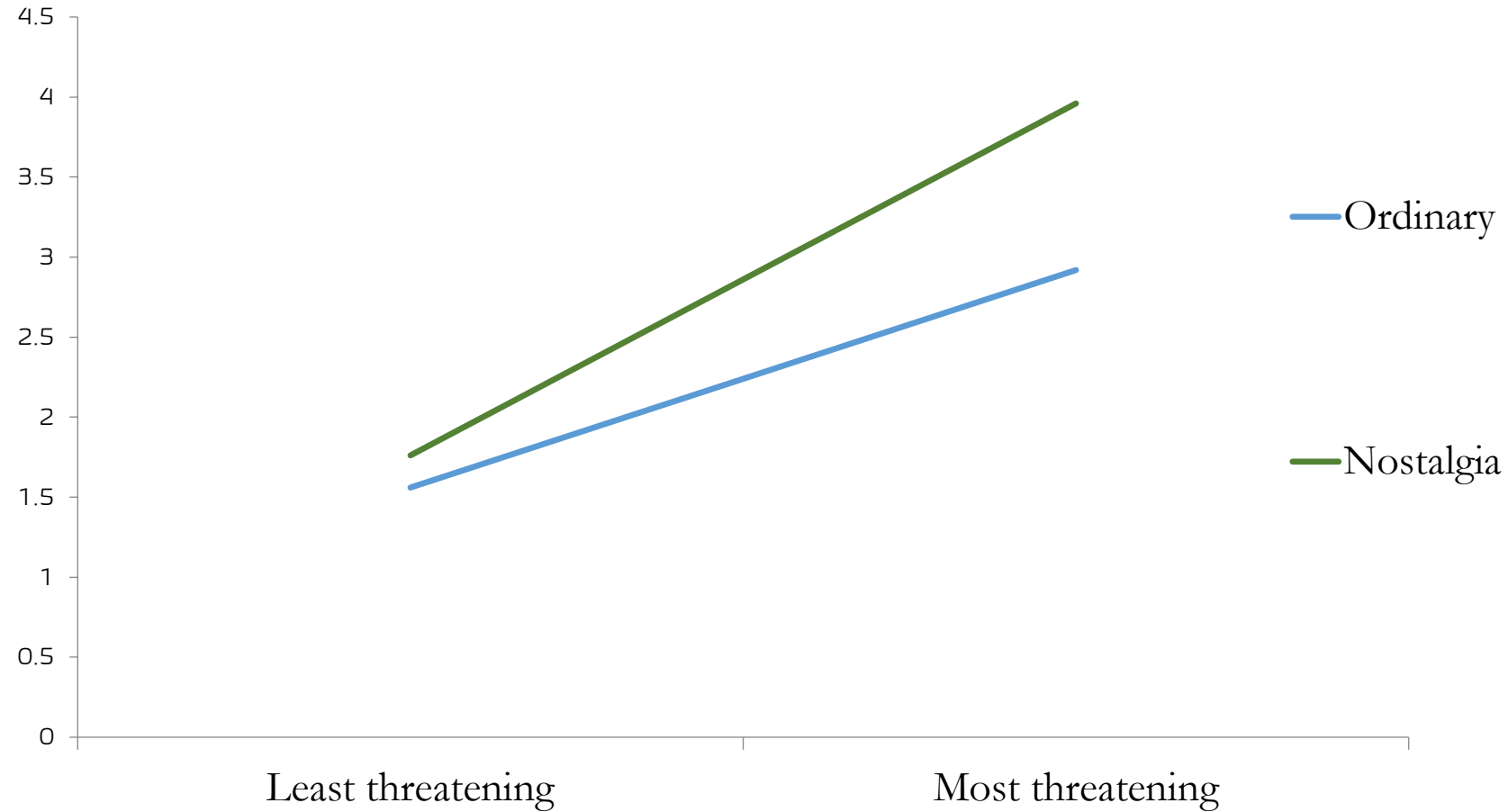
Conclusion: This series of experiments extends social psychological research with non-clinical populations into dementia care, providing evidence that nostalgia significantly enhances psychological resources. The finding that nostalgia increased recall of self-referent statements about dementia suggests that this emotion lends participants the fortitude to face the threat posed by their illness. The finding has potentially important clinical implications both for the development of reminiscence therapy and for facilitating adjustment to a diagnosis of dementia.

Keywords: Alzheimer's disease, autobiographical memory, dementia, immediate recall, psychological adaptation

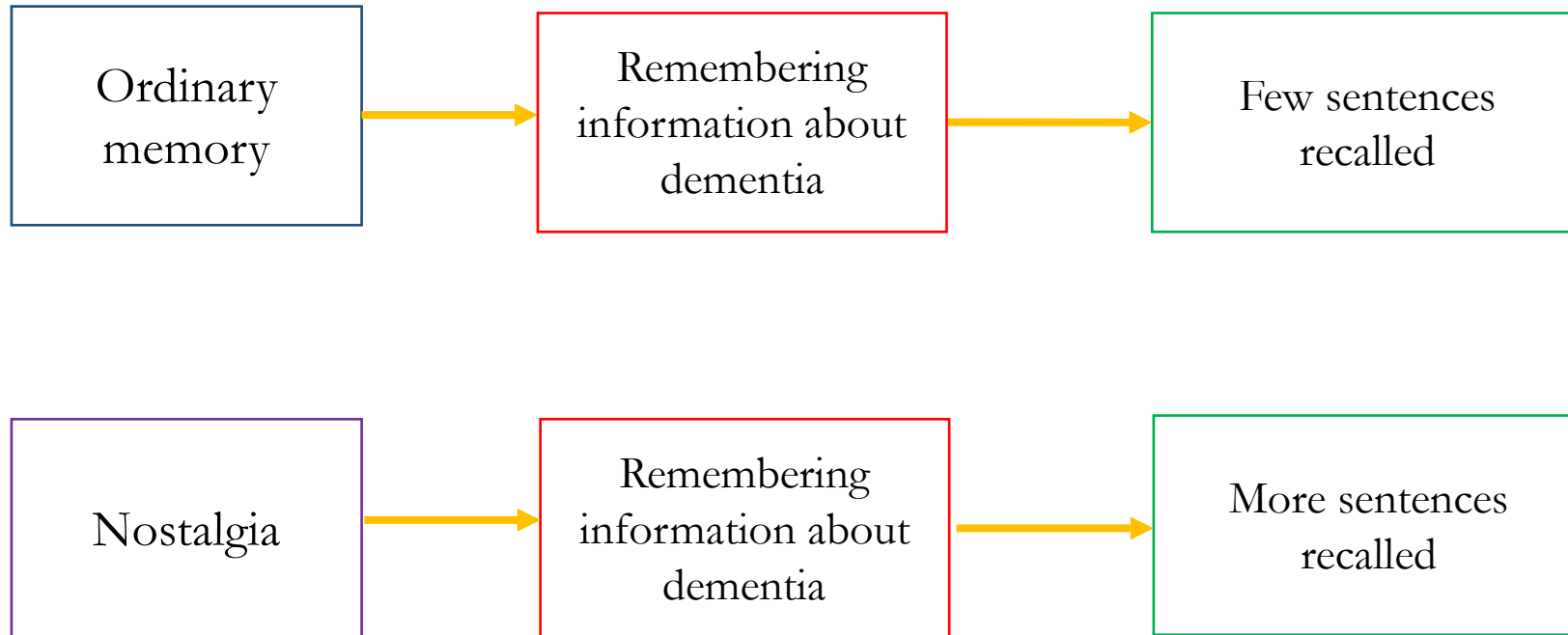
Trial Identifiers: ISRCTN54996662 (experiment 1 & 2) and ISRCTN78958013 (experiment 3)

- Ismail et al - study 3: Recruited 50 people with mild levels of dementia
- Randomised to either nostalgia or the ordinary memory condition
- They were then asked to recall statements about dementia that varied in levels of threat
- Led to significant improvement in recall for both least and most threatening statements with no increase in negative affect

Recall of information about dementia



Nostalgia leads to increase in recall of threatening statements without increasing anxiety



Third research theme:

What would an intervention around nostalgia
look like?



Joan enjoys thinking about the times she spent at the beach when she was younger. She looks at a colourful windmill that reminds her of this event. This memory is very important to Joan and she likes thinking about it and remembering what happened that day. Joan misses the event and wishes she could go back to that day. Joan feels happy but also a tiny bit sad as she thinks about it.



Ted finds his old football scarf and it makes him remember a time from when he was younger. As Ted looks at his scarf, it reminds him of special moments with his friends and the fun times they had together. He enjoys thinking about how good things were in the past and he wishes that he could travel back in time to experience those times again. Ted feels good about this memory.

Nostalgic conversations: The co-production of an intervention package for people living with dementia and their spouse

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Abstract

Objectives: Nostalgic memories are more social than other forms of autobiographical recall, often refer to atypical events, express more positive affect and reflect life as meaningful. Recalling a nostalgic (compared to ordinary) memory increases self-esteem, self-growth, meaning in life and social connectedness for people living with dementia. We set two objectives: to work with people living with dementia to develop an intervention based on nostalgia, and to assess whether couples could engage in nostalgic conversations.

Method: Our research fell into three phases. Initially, we consulted with people living with dementia and with carers to identify the parameters for a nostalgic intervention. From this, we drafted a workbook that contained triggers for nostalgic conversations, which we then took back to the public contributors for refinement. Finally, we trialled the workbook over 5 weeks with six couples, each of which included a person living with dementia. We assessed pre- and post-intervention self-esteem, self-growth, meaning in life and social connectedness for participants with dementia and social connectedness for carers. We then calculated Reliable Change Index scores and established

- Three stage process of public involvement/consultations
- Worked with eight people to create an intervention (focused on nostalgic conversations between couples)
- Development study with six couples
 - five weekly sessions, planning nostalgic activities using a workbook
 - Alternating home visits and phone calls
 - Acceptability interviews
 - Photos were the most common trigger used. Three couples used the intervention at least once a week. Two couples required more support in follow up sessions and one couple struggled to adopt the intervention
 - All couples showed some evidence of change across at least one domain of self-functioning
- How would this fit into service provision?
 - Memory clinics?
 - Voluntary sector?
 - Residential care?

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