

**Change Perspective, Change the Story? The Relationship Between Cognitive Avoidance
and Observer Vantage Point**

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Abstract

Background: When remembering an autobiographical event, individuals can see the scene either through their own eyes (field perspective) or through the eyes of an external spectator (observer perspective). Prior research has demonstrated that the content and subjective characteristics (e.g., emotionality) of a memory change when individuals switch from a field to an observer perspective. Furthermore, adopting an observer perspective might serve as a cognitive avoidance strategy to mitigate negative emotions associated with aversive memories. The current study aimed to examine the relationship between cognitive avoidance and vantage point shift.

Method: We conducted an experimental study ($N = 70$) where half of the participants recalled a distressing event two times from a field perspective, while the other half switched to an observer perspective the second time. After both recalls, participants rated emotionality, vividness, narrative coherence, and emotional distance of their memory.

Results: Cognitive avoidance did not statistically significantly predict proficiency in maintaining an observer perspective for an initial field memory. Similarly, cognitive avoidance was not meaningfully associated with enhanced changes in memory content and characteristics. The cognitive avoidance levels of participants with a natural field perspective were also not statistically different from participants with a natural observer perspective.

Conclusion: The findings do not support the notion that cognitive avoidance tendencies and the adoption of an observer perspective are related. However, as this research line might provide influential insights for theories about the persistence of traumatic memories and therapy, additional studies investigating the interplay of cognitive avoidance and observer vantage point are warranted.

Keywords: vantage point, observer perspective, cognitive avoidance, autobiographical memory, PTSD

Change Perspective, Change the Story? The Relationship Between Cognitive Avoidance and Observer Vantage Point

After decades of conducting research, scientist and past president of the Association for Psychological Science Elizabeth Loftus concluded that “Memory, like liberty, is a fragile thing” (Association for Psychological Science, 2011). Indeed, several studies have shown that memories are not carved in stone and that a variety of internal and external factors can alter them (e.g., Assefi & Garry, 2003; Braun et al., 2002; Ceci & Bruck, 1993). However, the kind of details we remember and how their recollection affects us might have far-reaching consequences for our mental health.

Perspectives of Autobiographical Memories

When thinking back to a personal event, individuals usually remember the situation either from a field or an observer perspective (Nigro & Neisser, 1983). Someone with a field perspective recollects an episode through their own eyes, similar to how it was originally experienced. In contrast, someone who adopts an observer perspective mentally sees themselves in the memory image like an external spectator with a third-person view. Although vantage point has been frequently treated as a dichotomous variable (e.g., Bergouignan et al., 2008; Kenny & Bryant, 2007; Kenny et al., 2009, Libby, 2003; McIsaac & Eich, 2004), some studies suggest that individuals might alternate between perspectives within a single memory (Berntsen et al., 2003; Rice & Rubin, 2009).

Relationship Between Vantage Point and Memory Content

The perspective of a memory influences the kind of information that is recalled. McIsaac and Eich (2002) found that the content of field and observer memories differed for a series of short manual tasks (e.g., performing biceps curls with a barbell). Field memories contained more affective reactions, physical sensations, psychological states, and associated ideas (i.e., events that preceded the experimental context). Observer memories, on the other hand, included more statements about the appearance of subjects, the performed actions, and

spatial relations between objects involved in a task. When analysing traumatic memories recalled from their natural viewpoint, observer memories also contained richer accounts of the physical appearance of actors, spatial relations, and peripheral details than field memories (McIsaac & Eich, 2004). Again, field memories consisted of more affective reactions, physical sensations, and psychological states experienced during the trauma than observer memories. Recently, King et al. (2022) examined how experimentally manipulating vantage point influences the content of autobiographical memories. Broadly in line with the previously discussed findings, they demonstrated that shifting from a field to an observer perspective led to a reduction of event-specific details associated with emotions, thoughts, and personal semantic details. Conversely, adopting an observer perspective increased the amount of information about the perspective and location of the rememberer. Overall, the existing body of research indicates that a third-person perspective evokes the recollection of more details a bystander would typically perceive, while a first-person perspective primarily guides attention to internal unobservable states.

Relationship Between Vantage Point and Memory Characteristics

Next to memory content, the vantage point also alters subjective memory characteristics. Generally, participants perceived observer memories as less emotional than field memories (McIsaac & Eich, 2002, 2004). Moreover, participants who adopted an observer point of view for an original field memory reported a reduction of emotional intensity, while the reversed pattern could not be observed (Berntsen & Rubin, 2006; Robinson & Swanson, 1993). Sekiguchi and Nonaka (2014) replicated this finding and showed that this effect lasted for a minimum of four weeks. Extending this result to traumatic memories, recalling a distressing event from an observer perspective compared to a field perspective elicited lower levels of negative mood and state anxiety directly after recollection and led to fewer intrusions over a period of seven days (Mooren et al., 2019). In two studies, shifting from a field to an observer perspective decreased the emotional intensity directly after

perspective manipulation and at follow-up two days later (King et al., 2022; St Jacques, 2017). To summarize, adopting an observer perspective compared to a field perspective seems to reduce the emotional load of a memory, and this effect persists, at least in the short term.

There is some evidence suggesting that vantage point also influences other aspects of the subjective experience of remembering. In a correlational study, participants were asked to recall an autobiographical memory associated with guilt or shame (Robinaugh & McNally, 2010). Memories with a natural observer vantage point were associated with a lower sense of reliving and less narrative coherence than field memories. Similarly, Berntsen and Rubin (2006) detected a decrease in reliving qualities when participants shifted from an initial field perspective to an observer perspective. Consistent with this result, Marcotti and St Jacques (2018) manipulated vantage point and demonstrated that the adoption of an observer perspective led to lower ratings of vividness than the field perspective.

Avoiding Negative Affect by Adopting an Observer Perspective

It has been repeatedly argued that adopting an observer perspective serves as a cognitive avoidance strategy to minimize aversive emotions evoked by negative memories (Holmes & Mathews, 2010; Kenny & Bryant, 2007; McIsaac & Eich, 2004; Mooren et al., 2019; Williams & Moulds, 2007). Support for this proposal comes from two lines of research. The first one encompasses studies that established a link between the vantage point of traumatic memories and symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The cognitive model of PTSD postulates that individuals suffering from PTSD have developed a strong sense of current threat and engage in avoidance strategies to reduce that perception (Ehlers & Clark, 2000). While avoidance may temporarily attenuate distress, it contributes to the maintenance of the disorder. With respect to Ehlers and Clark's model (2000), retaining an observer perspective might be a cognitive avoidance strategy that prevents changes in the nature of a traumatic memory (i.e., linking the experience to the specific context in which it occurred), thereby sustaining the perception of pervasive threat. Accordingly, if an observer

perspective represents a kind of avoidance, it should be associated with the severity of PTSD symptoms.

Several studies have examined the relationship between memory perspective and PTSD. Some tentative evidence comes from the finding that traumatic memories were more often remembered from an observer vantage point than positive memories (Porter & Birt, 2001). Furthermore, Berntsen et al. (2003) used a quasi-experimental design and divided participants into a PTSD symptom profile group and a non-symptom profile group based on a clinical questionnaire. Individuals with the PTSD symptom profile recalled a traumatic personal event more often from an observer perspective than individuals without the PTSD symptom profile. In a prospective study, individuals who adopted an observer perspective in the initial weeks after a serious injury displayed more severe PTSD symptoms at that time and a follow-up 12 months later (Kenny et al., 2009). From a sample of individuals with borderline personality disorder, participants with comorbid PTSD recalled more memories from an observer perspective than participants without PTSD (Van den Broeck, 2014). Interestingly, Cooper et al. (2002) found that prostitutes who experienced sexual assault from a third-person view also suffered from higher levels of PTSD later. Although one study observed lower PTSD scores in boys with an observer vantage point than boys with a field vantage point for a traumatic incident (Dawson & Bryant, 2016), the majority of research showed that an observer perspective is associated with detrimental effects in the long-run. Consequently, Mooren et al. (2019) argued that an observer perspective initially dampens emotional arousal but perpetuates PTSD symptoms once a memory has been consolidated.

The second line of research has scrutinized the relationship between memory perspective and avoidance tendencies directly. Kenny and Bryant (2007) categorized participants as either low avoiders or high avoiders based on their frequency of intrusive and avoidance symptoms. They found that high avoiders were more likely to recall traumatic experiences from an external viewpoint than low avoiders. In another correlational study, the

adoption of an observer perspective was correlated with measures of cognitive avoidance (Williams & Moulds, 2007). Consistent with such findings, Sutin and Robins (2008) coined the term dispassionate observer and speculated that a third-person vantage point reduces emotional reactions by allowing someone to distance themselves from the self in the memory.

Considering the literature, it seems plausible that individuals who habitually apply cognitive avoidance strategies tend to switch to an observer perspective after experiencing a distressful event. If that premise holds, they should be more proficient in shifting from a field to an observer perspective for a particular memory (e.g., maintaining the observer perspective more constantly) than individuals who typically do not engage in cognitive avoidance coping. One approach to address this question is to inspect the memory alterations that usually accompany such a vantage point modification and determine if higher cognitive avoidance tendencies are associated with enhanced changes. Nevertheless, I am not aware of a study that has tested if high cognitive avoidance levels actually facilitate the shift to an observer perspective, resulting in a heightened memory change.

The Current Study

Filling the above-mentioned gap in the existing literature, the goal of the present study was to examine a potential moderator function of cognitive avoidance on the magnitude of the effect of shifting vantage point on memory content and characteristics. Accordingly, we first measured cognitive avoidance tendencies and then asked participants to recall a negative autobiographical memory from a field perspective. In the next step, half of the participants recalled the same memory again from a field perspective (control condition), while the other half shifted to an observer perspective (experimental condition).

It was postulated that individuals with high avoidance tendencies are better capable of adopting an observer perspective for an initial field memory than individuals with low avoidance tendencies. Therefore, it was expected that the changes in memory characteristics and content found in previous research (e.g., Marcotti & St Jacques, 2018; McIsaac & Eich,

2002, 2004; Robinaugh & McNally, 2010; Sekiguchi & Nonaka, 2014) would be augmented along with high cognitive avoidance scores. In addition, this study predicted that participants with an original observer perspective for an aversive memory would have stronger cognitive avoidance tendencies than participants with an original field perspective (Kenny & Bryant, 2007; Williams & Moulds, 2007). In particular, the hypotheses were as follows:

Hypothesis 1. Higher scores on cognitive avoidance will be associated with higher scores on consistency, strength, and effortlessness of maintaining an observer perspective during the second memory recall.

Hypothesis 2. Higher scores on cognitive avoidance will be associated with an enhanced decrease of affective reactions in memory content when changing from a field to an observer perspective compared to a control group that maintained the field perspective over two recalls.

Hypothesis 3. Higher scores on cognitive avoidance will be associated with an amplified decrease in emotionality, vividness, and narrative coherence as well as a magnified increase in emotional distance when changing from a field to an observer perspective compared to a control group.

Hypothesis 4. Individuals who originally adopted an observer perspective will score higher on cognitive avoidance than individuals who initially remembered the event from a field perspective.

Method

Statement of Transparency

The findings reported in this paper are part of a larger research project that also included measures unrelated to the described research questions. I conclusively report those measures and results that were collected regarding the hypotheses addressed in this thesis. The research questions, hypotheses, and statistical analyses were preregistered on the Open

Science Framework (OSF) before starting the data collection. The preregistration can be accessed via the following link: https://osf.io/qvmnu/?view_only=57bb3d02-d40a42719b3edcfa0a152478. All data, results, and study materials will be publicly available on OSF once the project is finished.

Although the research team generally adhered to the submitted protocol, two details are worth mentioning: Firstly, we slightly adjusted the experimenter script during the data collection period to mention the exclusion of participants who are vulnerable to the consequences of recalling a negative memory. An unusually high number of participants were ineligible according to their pre-screening scores, and we speculated that some of them might have not answered honestly. We decided that this modification was justifiable because the same sentence was also included in the research information letter that participants were supposed to read thoroughly before giving informed consent. Secondly, testing of participants for the overall research project continued after data collection for this thesis ceased. Consequently, the sample sizes reported here and on OSF differ from each other.

Study Design and Power Analysis

We used a mixed two-by-two experimental design with one within-subjects factor (first recall vs. second recall) and one between-subjects factor (field perspective vs. observer perspective). Participants were randomly allocated to either of these conditions.

Prior to data collection, we performed a power analysis for F -tests and repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) using G*Power 3.1.9.7 (Faul et al., 2007) and an alpha of .05 to determine the target sample size. The result showed that a total sample of 130 participants was required to achieve 80% power for detecting a medium effect ($f = 0.25$; Cohen, 1988).

Participants

A total of 153 participants (102 women, 48 men, 2 other, 1 prefer not to say, $M_{age} = 20.43$, $SD = 2.43$) commenced this study, and 70 of them (42 women, 27 men, 1 other, $M_{age} =$

20.56, $SD = 2.79$) completed the whole experiment. All participants were first-year Psychology students at the University of Groningen who participated in this research in exchange for course credits. More participants than anticipated (54.25%) were not eligible to complete the experiment, which led to a smaller sample size than intended. Figure 1 displays how the final sample was reached. Those participants who finished the experiment did not differ significantly from participants who were excluded during the experiment concerning age ($t(151) = 0.59, p = .56$) and gender ($X^2(3, N = 153) = 3.85, p = .28$).

Measures

Screening Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

To identify participants with an elevated risk of developing PTSD, the students completed the Trauma Screening Questionnaire (TSQ; Brewin et al., 2002). This self-report instrument consists of 10 items, half of them measuring re-experiencing symptoms (e.g., “Upsetting dreams about the event”) and the other half assessing arousal symptoms (e.g., “Difficulty concentrating”). Respondents are instructed to endorse items that they have experienced at least twice in the past week. The total score ranges from 0 to 10, with a higher score implying the presence of more PTSD symptoms (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .73$). Participants with a score of 6 or above were ineligible for this study.

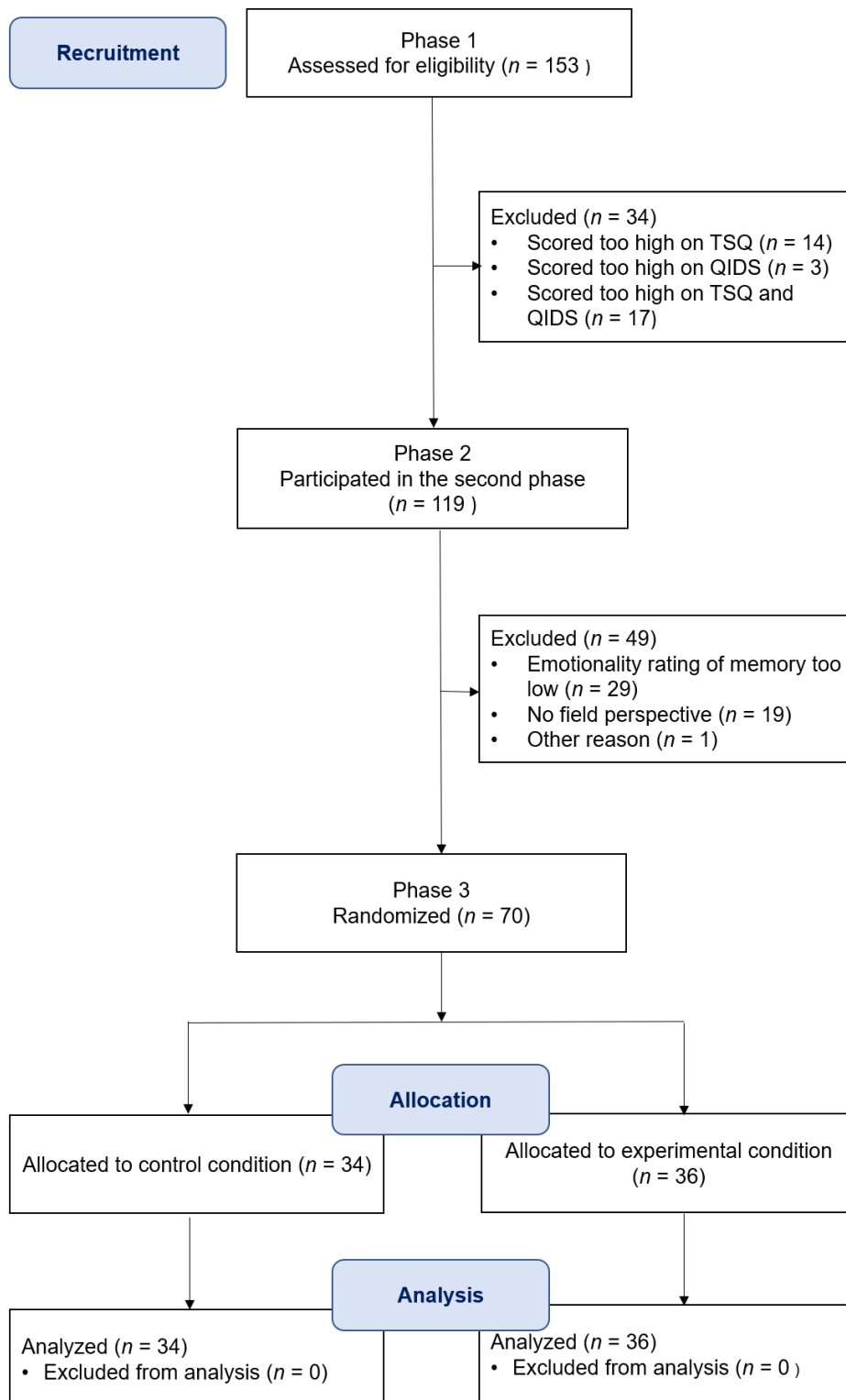
Screening Depressive Symptoms

As a second precautionary measure, we assessed depression levels with the Quick Inventory of Depressive Symptomatology (QIDS SR-16; Rush et al., 2003), which contains 16 items that measure symptoms of depression over the past seven days. Each item has four different answer options, with the first one denoting the complete absence of a certain symptom (e.g., “I do not feel sad”) and the others signalling the presence of a symptom to varying degrees (e.g., “I feel sad less than half the time”). In total, respondents receive a score between 0 and 27, and a higher number indicates more severe depression (Cronbach’s $\alpha =$

.85). Participants who fell in the moderate or severe depression category (score of 11 or higher) were screened out.

Figure 1

Flowchart of Participants



Cognitive Avoidance Tendencies

To determine the level of cognitive avoidance, participants completed the Cognitive Avoidance Questionnaire (CAQ; Sexton & Dugas, 2008b). The CAQ is a self-report instrument including 25 items (e.g., “I have thoughts that I try to avoid”) that measure five cognitive avoidance strategies: *thought suppression*, *the substitution of distressing thoughts*, *distraction*, *avoidance of threatening stimuli*, and *the transformation of mental images into verbal thoughts*. All items were answered on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *Not at all typical* to 5 = *Completely typical*. For the current study, the total CAQ score was relevant, which ranges from 25 to 125, with higher scores representing greater avoidance tendencies (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .94$).

Emotionality Memory

After the selection of a negative autobiographical memory, we asked participants to express how emotional this memory makes them feel at the present moment on a scale from 0 to 100 (0 = *Not emotional at all* and 100 = *Very emotional*). The cut-off score for a memory to be deemed suitable was 60 or above. Memories with an emotionality rating below 60 were not eligible for the third part of the study.

Memory Characteristics

We measured memory characteristics along four dimensions with slightly adapted items from the Autobiographical Memory Characteristics Questionnaire (Boyacıoğlu & Akfirat, 2015) on a 100-point Visual Analogue Scale (VAS). Participants rated the *emotional intensity* (“While remembering the event now, my feelings are intense”; 0 = *Not intense at all*, 100 = *Extremely intense*), *vividness* (“I can remember the event vividly, as though I were there”; 0 = *Not at all*, 100 = *As clearly as if it happened now*), *narrative coherence* (“As I remember the event, there are gaps and some things I cannot remember in the storyline”; 0 = *Nothing is missing*, 100 = *Many things not remembered*), and *emotional distance* (“While

writing about the event, I relate what happened rather than what I felt or thought”; 0 = *Not at all*, 100 = *Extremely*) of their chosen memory.

Maintenance of Vantage Point

After each recall, participants provided subjective ratings on how well they maintained the vantage point on a 100-point VAS. In particular, we assessed *consistency* (“What percentage of the total recall time were you able to maintain the field (observer) perspective?”; 0 = 0%, 100 = 100%), *strength* (“How strongly did you maintain the field (observer) perspective?”; 0 = *Not strong at all*, 100 = *Extremely strong*), and *effortlessness* (“How easy was it for you to maintain the field (observer) perspective?”; 0 = *Not easy at all*, 100 = *Extremely easy*) of the assigned perspective similar to McIsaac and Eich (2002).

Procedure

We conducted a three-phased laboratory session lasting about 1 hr 15 min in total. The phases occurred on the same day and were conducted consecutively. Throughout the experiment, participants received verbal and written instructions in English. All questionnaires were constructed with Qualtrics.

Phase 1

After providing written informed consent, participants answered three demographic questions. First, they typed in their current age in years and their nationality. Next, participants reported their gender out of four options (male, female, other, or prefer not to say). After that, participants filled in the TSQ and the QIDS SR-16. Only students who scored below the cut-off scores on both questionnaires could proceed to the second part of the experiment.

Phase 2

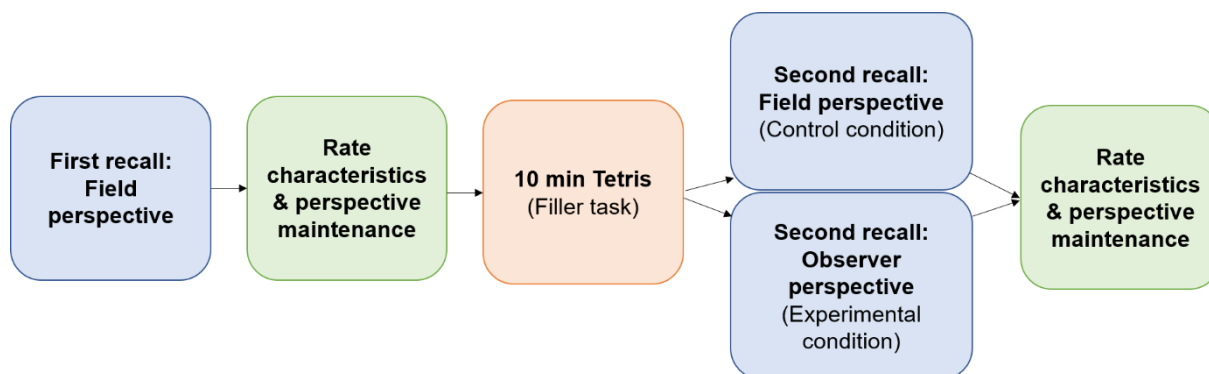
At the beginning of the second phase, participants completed the CAQ to measure cognitive avoidance tendencies. Following that, they were verbally instructed to select a negative personal memory that still carried an emotional load on them (see Appendix A). In

the next step, participants noted on a sheet of paper one keyword that described their memory, when the event happened, and how emotional it made them feel (see Appendix B for participant answer sheet). Those participants who did not rate their emotionality high enough were asked to think of a more emotional memory. If their second memory fulfilled the criteria, participants could continue with the study. Otherwise, the experiment was terminated, and they were debriefed.

Lastly, we also determined the original vantage point of the memory (see Appendix C). Memories with a natural observer perspective were ineligible. Subsequently, only students with a field vantage point for their chosen memory could continue with the experiment.

Phase 3

Figure 2 visualizes the main components of the third phase of the experiment. For this part, all participants digitally wrote down their selected memory from a field perspective in as much detail as possible. The participants could choose to report the memory either in English, Dutch, or German because emotional expression might be enhanced when bilingual speakers use their preferred language (Marian & Kaushanskaya, 2008). Afterwards, participants were instructed to play Tetris for ten minutes to neutralize any potential aversive affect caused by the first recall (Holmes et al., 2009). For the second recall, participants were allocated to one of the two conditions (field perspective vs. observer perspective) with the Qualtrics randomizer function. Accordingly, half of them wrote down the same memory again from a field perspective, while the other half adopted an observer perspective (see Appendix D). After both recalls, participants rated the characteristics of their memory and indicated how well they maintained the adopted vantage point. Finally, all participants played Tetris for another five minutes before they were fully debriefed.

Figure 2*Experimental Flow of the Third Phase of the Experiment***Coding**

In line with a system developed by McIsaac & Eich (2004), three of the experimenters coded memory content in eight categories: *affective reactions* (e.g., “I was *anxious* when it happened”), *physical sensations* (e.g., “my head *hurt*”), *psychological states* (e.g., “I *did not understand* what was happening”), *self-observations* (“I can see how I fall”), *physical actions* performed during the event (“I *closed* the door”), *spatial relations* between objects, between an object and an actor, or between actors (e.g., “she stood *next to me*”), *first-person accounts* (e.g., “I,” “me”), and *peripheral details* not related to the aversive experience (e.g., “the sun was shining”). The intraclass correlation coefficients (ICCs) ranged from good to excellent (lowest ICC = 0.80, highest ICC = 1.00). Only details related to the main event were included in the analysis, while information about previous or subsequent events (e.g., “my brother had been away for a week”) was not coded. Any disagreements encountered during the coding were resolved through discussion.

Analyses

Throughout the analyses, normality was assumed for all continuous variables. This assumption was tested by inspecting the respective QQ plots and the descriptive statistics. The presence of substantial outliers was checked by examining boxplots and scatterplots, when

applicable, of all variables used in the statistical calculations. Although the difference scores for emotionality, narrative coherence, and emotional distance in the control condition as well as the difference score for narrative coherence in the experimental condition contained outliers, I opted against excluding them from the analyses after reviewing the bivariate scatterplots with the CAQ scores. Additionally, there were no indications of invalid data (e.g., technical errors) in the experimental logbook for these cases.

To test for an association between cognitive avoidance and maintenance of the observer perspective, I calculated Pearson correlations for CAQ scores and consistency, strength, and effortlessness of maintaining the observer perspective. The corresponding scatterplots were scrutinized to evaluate the linearity of the relationships between the variables. Subsequently, Fisher z -transformation was used to construct a 95% confidence interval for the three resulting correlation coefficients.

For investigating a potential moderator function of cognitive avoidance as described in hypotheses 2 and 3, I computed the difference scores for all relevant variables (e.g., affective reactions) by subtracting the mean number in the second recall from the mean number in the first recall. Afterwards, Pearson correlations between the CAQ scores and the difference scores were calculated. Next, I compared the correlation coefficients in the two conditions (field-field vs. field-observer) using Fisher z -transformation. A linear relationship between CAQ scores and all difference scores was again tested by inspecting the scatterplots. Lastly, participants with a natural observer perspective and participants with a natural field perspective were compared with Welch's t -test in line with recommendations of Delacre et al. (2017).

Because we eventually deviated from the previously calculated participant number, a sensitivity analysis with an alpha of .05 and 80% power was conducted following the data collection (G*Power 3.1.9.7; Faul et al., 2007). For Pearson correlations, z -tests for two

independent Pearson r 's, and Welch's t -test, the actual sample size solely allowed the detection of large effect sizes (Cohen, 1969, 1988).

Results

Cognitive Avoidance and Maintaining the Observer Perspective

The first hypothesis predicted that higher scores on cognitive avoidance would be associated with higher ratings on consistency, strength, and effortlessness of maintaining an observer perspective. This analysis exclusively included data from participants in the experimental group because they adopted the observer perspective during the second memory recall. Contrary to expectations, none of the correlations between cognitive avoidance and the measures of observer perspective maintenance were statistically significant (see Table 1). Thus, the data did not provide evidence for a relationship between cognitive avoidance and proficiency level of taking a third-person perspective.

Table 1

Pearson Correlations Between Cognitive Avoidance Scores and Consistency, Strength, and Effortlessness of Maintaining the Observer Perspective (n = 36)

		Consistency	Strength	Effortlessness
CAQ	r	.23	.21	.28
	95% CI	[-.10, .55]	[-.11, .54]	[-.03, .60]
	p	.18	.21	.10

Note. CAQ = Cognitive Avoidance Questionnaire.

Cognitive Avoidance as a Moderator for Vantage Point and Changes in Memory Content

Secondly, it was anticipated that cognitive avoidance would moderate the relationship between vantage point and memory content. In particular, higher scores on cognitive

avoidance were envisaged to be associated with an increased reduction of affective reactions in the memories of participants who shifted from a field perspective to an observer perspective (in comparison to the control group who maintained the field perspective). Table 2 presents the mean number of affective reactions across both conditions along with the mean differences between the first and second memory recall. The difference between the mean CAQ scores in the control group ($M = 56.32$, $SD = 19.07$) and the experimental group ($M = 55.67$, $SD = 17.23$) was not statistically significant ($t_{Welch}(66.33) = 0.15$, $p = .88$). To test the second hypothesis, the correlation coefficients between the difference scores of affective reactions and the cognitive avoidance scores in the control condition ($r(34) = 0.17$, $p = .33$) and the experimental condition ($r(36) = 0.08$, $p = .65$) were calculated. Comparing both correlation coefficients with Fisher z -transformation, yielded no statistically significant difference between the groups ($z = -0.38$, $p = .71$). Hence, the data did not support a moderator function of cognitive avoidance in that context.

Table 2

Mean Number of Affective Reactions in the First and Second Recall and the Mean Difference Score for Both Conditions

		Field-Field ($n = 34$)	Field-Observer ($n = 36$)
Affective Reactions	First Recall	3.56 (2.90)	4.03 (3.41)
	Second Recall	2.65 (2.15)	1.86 (1.81)
	Difference	0.91 (2.37)	2.17 (2.84)

Note. Standard deviations are presented in parentheses.

Cognitive Avoidance as a Moderator for Vantage Point and Changes in Memory

Characteristics

The third prediction was that cognitive avoidance would moderate the relationship between vantage point and subjective memory characteristics. More precisely, it was expected that higher scores on cognitive avoidance would be associated with a stronger reduction of self-rated emotionality, vividness, and narrative coherence along with a magnified increase in emotional distance in the experimental condition compared to the control condition. Table 3 displays the mean ratings of these characteristics for the first and second memory recall together with the mean differences. For both conditions, the correlation coefficients between cognitive avoidance and the difference scores of emotionality, vividness, narrative coherence, and emotional distance were computed (see Table 4). A comparison of these coefficients with the Fisher z -transformation revealed that there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups regarding the correlations between cognitive avoidance and the difference scores of emotionality ($z = 0.09, p = .93$), vividness ($z = -0.14, p = .88$), narrative coherence ($z = 0.22, p = .83$), and emotional distance ($z = 0.02, p = .98$). Subsequently, the hypothesis that cognitive avoidance would be correlated with the magnitude of changes in memory characteristics was not corroborated.

Table 3

Mean Ratings of Emotionality, Vividness, Narrative Coherence, and Emotional Distance in the First and Second Recall and the Mean Difference Scores for Both Conditions

		Field-Field ($n = 34$)	Field-Observer ($n = 36$)
Emotionality	First Recall	69.44 (14.83)	66.92 (13.52)
	Second Recall	63.26 (18.74)	46.69 (20.20)
	Difference	6.18 (19.12)	20.22 (22.78)

		Field-Field (<i>n</i> = 34)	Field-Observer (<i>n</i> = 36)
Vividness	First Recall	78.38 (14.61)	73.19 (20.10)
	Second Recall	74.85 (18.27)	58.42 (26.99)
	Difference	3.53 (13.05)	14.78 (22.52)
Coherence	First Recall	35.56 (28.21)	33.75 (27.08)
	Second Recall	33.82 (25.82)	37.69 (26.57)
	Difference	1.74 (17.53)	-3.94 (21.01)
Distance	First Recall	42.68 (22.52)	42.58 (24.84)
	Second Recall	49.62 (20.36)	58.11 (31.60)
	Difference	-6.94 (23.77)	-15.53 (41.98)

Note. Standard deviations are presented in parentheses.

Table 4

Pearson Correlations Between Cognitive Avoidance Scores and Difference Scores of Emotionality, Vividness, Narrative Coherence, and Emotional Distance for Both Conditions

	Field-Field (<i>n</i> = 34)		Field-Observer (<i>n</i> = 36)	
	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
Emotionality	.13	.48	.15	.39
Vividness	.04	.84	.00	1.00
Coherence	-.06	.75	.00	1.00
Distance	.07	.71	.10	.58

Cognitive Avoidance and the Initial Vantage Point of a Negative Memory

Lastly, it was hypothesized that participants who reported an observer perspective for their negative autobiographical memory would score higher on cognitive avoidance than participants who initially remembered the event from a field perspective. Therefore, the mean cognitive avoidance score for participants with a natural field vantage point ($M = 55.99$, $SD = 18.01$) was compared to the mean score of participants with a natural observer vantage point ($M = 63.12$, $SD = 22.69$). Since group sizes differed substantially ($n_{field} = 70$ and $n_{observer} = 17$), Welch's t -test was most appropriate. However, the difference in cognitive avoidance levels between the two groups was statistically nonsignificant ($t_{Welch}(21.16) = -1.21$, $p = .24$).

Discussion

The aim of this research was to examine a potential relationship between the tendency to employ cognitive avoidance strategies and adopting an observer perspective for distressing autobiographical memories. As opposed to expectations, the data did not confirm the hypothesis that cognitive avoidance predicts how consistently, strongly, and effortlessly participants maintained the observer perspective for an initial field memory. Likewise, the results did not indicate that cognitive avoidance amplifies changes in memory content and self-rated characteristics evoked by perspective manipulation. The observations were also incongruent with the proposal that participants with a natural observer perspective for their negative memory differ in cognitive avoidance levels from participants with a natural field perspective. Summarizing the main results, the data are inconclusive regarding an association between cognitive avoidance tendencies and an external vantage point.

This outcome is unexpected as it was theorized that individuals who frequently employ cognitive avoidance strategies are habituated to taking the observer perspective for a negative memory. Following that reasoning, it seemed probable that they are more skilled in shifting from a field to an observer perspective for a certain memory than individuals with low cognitive avoidance tendencies. Previous studies have already established a link between

cognitive avoidance and the recall of negative events from an external vantage point (Kenny & Bryant, 2007; Williams & Moulds, 2007). However, the presented data do not support the idea that the adoption of a third-person perspective is a cognitive avoidance strategy aimed at reducing the distress caused by aversive memories (e.g., Holmes & Mathews, 2010; Mooren et al., 2019; Williams & Moulds, 2007).

Similarly, this study did not provide evidence for a moderator function of cognitive avoidance. Contrary to predictions, it was not observed that high levels of cognitive avoidance accompanied enhanced changes in memory content and memory characteristics. Past research has shown that memories from a third-person perspective contained fewer affective reactions than memories from a first-person perspective (McIsaac & Eich, 2002, 2004). In addition, compared to field memories, observer memories were rated as less emotional (Berntsen & Rubin, 2006; Robinson & Swanson, 1993; Sekiguchi & Nonaka, 2014), less vivid (Marcotti & St Jacques, 2018), less coherent, and presumably appeared more emotional distant (Robinaugh & McNally, 2010). Despite the hypothesis that high avoidance tendencies would moderate the switch from a field to an observer perspective leading to an enhancement of these changes, the data are inconsistent with this assumption. Lastly, the results challenge the aforementioned findings that the tendency to engage in avoidance is associated with recalling a distressing memory from an observer vantage point (Kenny & Bryant, 2007; Williams & Moulds, 2007).

Limitations

The main limitation of the current study was the number of participants which was considerably lower than originally planned. Accordingly, a conclusive interpretation of the results is seriously hampered by the small sample size. The lack of statistically significant findings could be attributed to the absence of any true effects or insufficient power of the study to detect them. Possible reasons for the low percentage of eligible participants are manifold. The majority of ineligible participants (22.22% of all participants) scored too high

on either one or both of our screening instruments. The pre-screening was an essential precautionary measure supposed to protect vulnerable individuals from the adverse consequences of recalling a negative memory. It could be conjectured that some of the participants may have intentionally distorted their scores because they assumed the target group was individuals with mental health problems. Even though there is no direct evidence, one participant commented that they expected to be ineligible due to their low level of depressive symptoms. Participation in this experiment was voluntary, but the students received study points after completion, which are necessary to pass one of their first-year courses. Although we emphasized during the experiment that they should answer as honestly as possible, this request might have not fully prevented “faking bad.”

Moreover, other participants (18.95% of all participants) were unable to finish the study because they failed to think of a memory that reached the predetermined cut-off score for emotionality. While this is only a speculation, the exact phrasing of the instructions for the memory collection (see Appendix A) might have hindered the attainment of the desired sample size. Participants were asked to indicate how emotional the chosen memory makes them feel in the present moment. The unfamiliar laboratory environment might have prevented some participants from feeling very emotional, even though the memory still carried a strong emotional load on them. Thus, the phrasing should be slightly adjusted (e.g., “Can you write down how emotional this memory makes you feel when you think about it?”) or the cut-off score lowered in studies using a similar exclusion criterion.

Secondly, we treated vantage point as a dichotomous item (i.e., either observer perspective or field perspective). Nonetheless, previous studies demonstrated that this assumption does not always hold because individuals can have both perspectives for one memory (Berntsen et al., 2003; Rice & Rubin, 2009). This finding also resonates with the personal experiences of the experimenters during the conduction of the study. Some participants were hesitant to state their vantage point because they partly saw the memory

through their own eyes, while other parts were experienced from a third-person perspective. Consequently, it is impossible to determine how many of the participants, if any, had a pure initial field perspective. For future studies, it is therefore appropriate to measure vantage point on a continuous scale enabling participants to report a mixed perspective.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

By examining the role of adopting the observer perspective for troublesome memories as a cognitive avoidance mechanism, this research tried to fill a gap in the existing vantage point literature. To my knowledge, this was the first study to consider a likely moderator function of cognitive avoidance for memory changes caused by switching from a field to an observer perspective. The results, however, did not show an association between cognitive avoidance tendencies and a magnified change in memory content and characteristics. That being said, the current study could only detect large effects. Effect sizes of this magnitude are uncommon in psychological research, given the inherent complexity of the subject of study (Funder & Ozer, 2019). It should be also acknowledged that the data neither support a relationship between using cognitive avoidance strategies and shifting to a third-person perspective nor refute it. It is conceivable that the artificial laboratory setting and written memory recalls diminished effects that occur in a real-world context (i.e., spontaneously reliving a troublesome experience). Alternatively, the relationship between cognitive avoidance and observer vantage point might be more complex than anticipated.

Previous findings suggested that adopting an observer perspective is a cognitive avoidance strategy (Kenny & Bryant, 2007; Williams & Moulds, 2007). Nevertheless, there are prominent methodological differences between these studies and the current experiment. Firstly, all participants in the study of Kenny and Bryant (2007) had been exposed to traumatic events. We instructed participants to recall a negative personal memory, but the experience could be non-traumatic in nature (e.g., a mutual breakup). Williams and Moulds (2007), on the other hand, also did not require a traumatic memory but included participants

who fulfilled the criteria for a Major Depressive Episode. It is noteworthy that depressive symptoms were also no exclusion criterion in Kenny and Bryant (2007). In contrast, participants scoring above the cut-off score for depressive symptoms were ineligible for the present study. Accordingly, adopting an observer perspective might represent a cognitive avoidance strategy mainly for traumatic events or a certain population (e.g., individuals with depression). Additional studies are required to shed light on that issue. For example, they could compare the relationship between cognitive avoidance tendencies and the adoption of an observer vantage point for different types of memories (e.g., traumatic vs. non-traumatic) or across different subsamples (e.g., healthy participants vs. participants with a clinically diagnosed depression).

More research on that topic might have also important ramifications for the theoretical account of the maintenance of PTSD. It was proposed that PTSD symptoms become persistent when individuals keep processing an experienced trauma in detrimental ways (Ehlers & Clark, 2000). In particular, one of the suggested underlying mechanisms is the failure to integrate all information about a traumatic incident into general memory storage. If a disturbing event is not linked to explicit information relating to the context of its occurrence, it creates the perception of a ubiquitous threat. Specifically, the processing of affective components might be hampered by an observer perspective (McIsaac & Eich, 2004). Hence, persistently adopting an observer perspective after a traumatic event might be one of the maladaptive processing strategies that interfere with mental recovery. Nevertheless, the results of the current study are not consistent with that theory. Again, it might be that the described mechanisms exclusively apply to traumatic memories, but further research needs to resolve that discrepancy.

Finally, accumulating more knowledge of that topic would be extremely valuable because it could have far-reaching consequences for therapy. If it would be revealed that individuals with high cognitive avoidance tendencies were also likely to shift to an observer

perspective after an aversive incident, the treatment approach for these clients could be optimized. Several psychological disorders are associated with repeated attempts to avoid negative emotions, such as generalized anxiety disorder (Borkovec et al., 2004; Sexton & Dugas, 2008a), depression (Purden, 1999), PTSD (Ehlers & Clark, 2000) as well as the personality trait neuroticism (Elliot & Thrash, 2002). As outlined beforehand, the persistent use of a third-person perspective might be detrimental in the long-run by maintaining or enhancing symptoms of mental illnesses (Kenny et al., 2009, Mooren et al., 2019; Van den Broeck, 2014). Assuming that individuals who are prone to cognitive avoidance also tend to adopt an observer perspective, their treatment should focus on processing distressing or even traumatic experiences from a first-person perspective.

Conclusion

The current study did not obtain support for the idea that the tendency to engage in cognitive avoidance and recalling an aversive event from an observer vantage point are associated. Furthermore, cognitive avoidance did not seem to meaningfully increase changes in memory characteristics and content when deliberately shifting from a field to an observer perspective. Given the potential theoretical and clinical implications, there is a need for further research with adequate statistical power to explore this matter in greater depth and provide more conclusive insights.

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Appendix A

Instructions for Selecting an Aversive Personal Memory

We can now continue to the part of the experiment where I ask you to think back of a negative personal memory. You will keep that negative memory in your mind for the rest of the experiment. It is important that you choose a negative memory that still makes you emotional, for example, sad or anxious. The negative event may be from a long time ago, but it is also okay if it happened recently. At this point, you do not need to tell me the memory. However, you should be comfortable writing it down in detail in phase three of the study. Have you understood everything so far? Can you think of a negative personal memory that still makes you feel emotional?

If a Participant Cannot Think of a Negative Memory

No worries, that is okay. To help you, I propose that I show you a list with examples of what other students have mentioned. Perhaps you will suddenly remember something that applies to you as well.

If a Participant Can Think of a Negative Memory

That is great to hear. I would like you to write down three things for me on the paper that is on the table. Could you please write down one keyword that describes your memory? Can you also write down how emotional it still makes you feel now, on a scale from 0 – 100, where 0 stands for not emotional at all, and 100 stands for very emotional. And can you write down when the event happened? Thank you. Would you mind if I have a look at it with you?

Emotionality < 60

Thank you for rating your memory. I see that you picked a memory that is just above/below the middle of the scale. For this study, it is essential that the memory is more emotional to you. Could you think of another more emotional memory than the one you chose before?

Appendix B

Participant Answer Sheet

Individual Differences in Remembering Negative Personal Events

Participant number (the experimenter will tell you)

Part A

Keyword(s) describing your memory:

.....
.....

Can you also tell me, how emotional the memory still makes you feel at this moment, on a scale from 0-100, where 0 stands for not emotional at all, and 100 stands for very emotional?:

When did the event happen:years.....months.....days

Part B

Keyword(s) describing your memory:

.....
.....

Can you also tell me, how emotional the memory still makes you feel at this moment, on a scale from 0-100, where 0 stands for not emotional at all, and 100 stands for very emotional?:

When did the event happen:years.....months.....days

Appendix C

Verbal Assessment of Vantage Point

That looks great. I want to tell you a little bit more on how people can remember events. People can remember an event through their own eyes. That is from roughly the same viewpoint from what it was originally experienced. This might sound a bit abstract, but what I mean is that you remember the event just like you also see the situation right now. I am interested if that also applies to the memory you just chose. In other words, when you think back to the event, do you remember it as if you were there looking at the situation again through your own eyes? Yes, or no?

If a Participant Does Not Have a Field Perspective

Okay, in that case, I would like to tell you the following: Another way people can remember events is as an outside observer looking at the situation from an external vantage point where one can see themselves in the memory. You can think of it as a bird's eye view. Although, the external perspective does not necessarily need to be from above looking at the event or situation. So, as you remember the event, do you feel as an observer looking at yourself in the memory from an external vantage point? Yes, or no?

Appendix D

Vantage Point Instructions

In the next question, we will ask you to recall and write down the same personal memory again. Based on earlier studies, we know that participants sometimes do not do such a second assignment seriously anymore. However, it is worth stressing that for this study it is **extremely important** that you, again: **Take your time** to write down what you can remember. Write down **everything** you can remember, even when details, aspects or feelings related to the memory do not feel crucial to you.

Field Perspective Instructions

When remembering an event, people can imagine the scene in various ways. One way that people remember an event is through their own eyes, from roughly the same viewpoint it was originally experienced. Please adopt this so-called **field perspective**. Describe and write your memory from your own eyes in as much detail as you can or feel comfortable with.

Note: in your preferred language (English, German, Dutch).

Observer Perspective Instructions

Another way that people can remember an event is as an outside observer, or onlooker, looking at the situation from an external vantage point (e.g., a bird's eye view), where one can see him or herself in the memory. Please adopt this perspective for your selected personal memory. Although it might feel redundant, we ask you to describe and write down your memory again, but this time from a **bird's eye view**, in as much detail as you can or feel comfortable with. *Note: in your preferred language (English, German, Dutch).*