



## Sources of academic self-efficacy-beliefs : The role of the specificity level of autobiographical memories about academic performance

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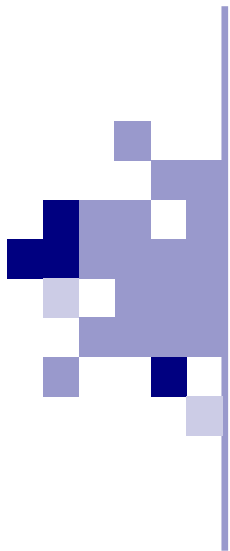
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**LES CAHIERS DE RECHERCHE EN EDUCATION ET FORMATION**

**Sources of academic self-efficacy-beliefs:  
The role of the specificity level of autobiographical memories  
about academic performance**

*Marie Vanlede, Etienne Bourgeois,  
Benoît Galand, and Pierre Philippot*

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L'éducation et la formation constituent des enjeux fondamentaux pour la société contemporaine. Deux équipes de recherche à l'UCL se préoccupent de ces questions : le Groupe interfacultaire de recherche sur les systèmes d'éducation et de formation (GIRSEF) et la Chaire UNESCO de pédagogie universitaire (CPU).

Le GIRSEF est un groupe de recherche pluridisciplinaire fondé en 1998 afin d'étudier les systèmes d'éducation et de formation, réunissant des sociologues, économistes, psychologues et psychopédagogues. L'attention est portée notamment sur l'évaluation des résultats des systèmes éducatifs en termes d'équité et d'efficacité, sur leurs modes de fonctionnement et de régulation, sur les politiques publiques à leur endroit, les logiques des acteurs principaux ou encore sur le fonctionnement local des organisations de formation et l'engagement et la motivation des apprenants. Sur le plan empirique, ses recherches portent essentiellement sur le niveau primaire et secondaire d'enseignement, mais aussi sur l'enseignement supérieur et la formation d'adultes.

La Chaire de Pédagogie Universitaire (CPU) a été créée en mai 2001 et a reçu le label de Chaire UNESCO en septembre 2002. Elle assure également le secrétariat et la coordination du Réseau Européen de Recherche et d'Innovation en Enseignement Supérieur (RERIES), réseau européen des chaires Unesco sur l'Enseignement supérieur. Elle a pour mission de contribuer à la promotion de la qualité de la pédagogie universitaire à l'UCL, en contribuant à la fois à la recherche dans ce domaine et en coordonnant une formation diplômante en pédagogie universitaire (Master complémentaire en pédagogie universitaire et de l'enseignement supérieur).

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## Abstract

The impact on academic self-efficacy beliefs of the specificity at which memories of past academic performance are processed was investigated. Relying on autobiographical memory (AM) theories, it was predicted that, for past academic failures, which represent a threat to self-efficacy beliefs, specific processing would help in maintaining high self-efficacy beliefs compared to general processing. For

past academic successes, no difference was expected between the two levels of specificity. An experimental study with 54 psychology students was conducted and results confirmed the main hypothesis. A mediating effect of emotional state on the influence of the specificity of processing past academic performance on self-efficacy beliefs was expected. This mediation could not be evidenced.

## Introduction

The literature has largely evidenced that students' past academic performance constitutes the main source of self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1997; Gist, Schoewerer, & Rosen, 1989; Lent, Lopez, & Bieschke, 1991). In other words, academic self-efficacy beliefs are essentially determined by previous achievements students have experienced. Numerous studies have evidenced that past successes enhance, while past failures reduce, self-efficacy beliefs (e.g., Chapman & Tunmer, 1997; Skaalvik & Valas, 1999). However, according to Bandura (1997), the impact of past performance on self-efficacy beliefs is not direct but is mediated by a cognitive processing of reconstruction and interpretation.

The present study aims at investigating some features of this cognitive processing that may play a critical role in how past performance influences self-efficacy beliefs. Previous achievement experiences being personal events for students, they are part of their autobiographical memory (AM). AM theories thus provide a useful framework to investigate this cognitive processing. Conway and colleagues

(Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000, Conway, Singer & Tagini, 2004) have proposed an AM model that describes close links between the AM database (containing students previous achievement experiences) and the self (comprising self-efficacy beliefs). According to this model, the level of specificity at which AM (past performance) are processed play a critical role in their influence on the self (self-efficacy beliefs). Activating an AM at a *specific* level, which comprises experience-near sensory-perceptual-cognitive-effective details, provides a rich cognitive material that can be used for self-analyse processes and for coping strategies useful to maintain positive self-conceptions in the case of adverse experiences. In contrast, activating an AM at a *general* level, which comprises more conceptual and abstract information of categories of events, impairs problem solving because of its abstractness, and positive self-conceptions thus can not be protected. Based on this theory, we propose the counter-intuitive hypothesis that the retrieval of a past academic failure (that represents an adverse experience threatening self-efficacy beliefs) at a specific level will yield higher self-efficacy beliefs than

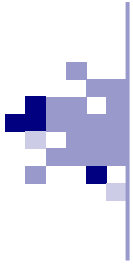
retrieving such an experience at a general level. For past academic success experiences, we expect no difference between the two types of cognitive processing given that self-efficacy beliefs are not threatened and do not need to be protected through problem solving or coping strategies.

Another line of research has evidenced the same beneficial effect of AM specific processing on emotional state. In several studies, AM level of specificity was experimentally manipulated by asking participants to activate either very specific or overgeneral AM. It has been shown that voluntary activation of a specific AM has the counter-intuitive effect of reducing the emotional activation. However, remaining at a general level in memory elaboration has opposite consequences (e.g., Neumann, 2007; Neumann & Philippot, 2006; Philippot, Schaefer, & Herbette, 2003; Schaefer & Philippot, 2005). The present study intended to replicate these observations on emotional state in an academic context. It is thus hypothesized that the specificity level at which past academic experiences are processed impact on students' emotional state. It is also predicted that the valence of the activated past academic experience (success vs. failure) determines the degree of positivity/negativity of participants' emotional state.

Finally, the present study aimed at testing a possible mediation of AM specificity and valence on self-efficacy beliefs through emotional state. According to Baron and Kenny (1986), to be significant a mediating effect requires three conditions: 1) independent variables affect the mediator, 2) independent variables have an effect on the outcome, 3) the mediator affects the outcome. The two first relations have been documented above. Concerning the expected effect of emotional state on

self-efficacy beliefs, two theoretical arguments can be invoked. First, emotional state constitutes one of the four sources of self-efficacy beliefs described by Bandura (1997). The more individuals' emotional state is positive, the more they are likely to hold high self-efficacy beliefs about their performance (Maddux, 1995). Second, self-efficacy beliefs should be modulated by individuals' current emotional state through an "affect infusion" process, defined as "a process whereby affectively loaded information exerts an influence on and becomes incorporated into the judgmental process, entering into the judge's deliberations and eventually coloring the judgmental outcome" (Forgas, 1995, p. 39).

In sum, this first study aims at examining how the valence and the specificity at which AM of past academic performance are processed affect self-efficacy beliefs, and whether this influence is mediated through emotional state. Valence of AM was experimentally manipulated while level of specificity was introduced as a moderator variable. Participants were thus asked to retrieve an academic success or failure, following a recall procedure in a controlled laboratory context. Specificity was assessed through a self-report measure based on Williams' criteria (1996) stating that a specific memory is a memory of an event that did not last more than 24 hours, that happened only once, and that can be located precisely in time and place. Participants' emotional state was measured shortly after memory retrieval in order to control, on the one hand, how it is affected by the retrieved AM and, on the other hand, its impact on self-efficacy beliefs. In order to avoid an interference between the effect of the experimental manipulation and the influence of their past academic results on self-efficacy beliefs, we controlled for participants' results at their last examination session.



## Method

### Participants

Fifty four undergraduate students (76% female) from a Belgian university participated in the experiment in exchange of course credits. They were enrolled in the first two years of the university's psychology program (33% in the 1<sup>st</sup> year, 67% in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year).

### Design

Autobiographical memory evocation was manipulated in a between-subject design with valence (success vs. failure) as independent variable, and emotional state and academic self-efficacy as dependent variables. In addition, we controlled the following variables: specificity of retrieved memory (moderator) and past academic results (covariate). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two experimental conditions (success or failure AM).

### Procedure

The study took place in a laboratory comprising a main room and five individual cubicles. Therefore five students could participate in the experiment at the same time. The number of participants varied from one to five per session. Upon their arrival at the laboratory, participants were given instructions and information about the experimental procedure. They were informed that they could interrupt the experiment at any time and that all data collected would be kept strictly confidential. The experimenter dissimulated the real goal of the study and told the participants that the experiment aimed at testing whether personality has an impact on emotional memory.

Participants were seated in the separate cubicles for the AM retrieval procedure (Philippot & Schaeffer, 2001). It started with a 2 to 3 minutes relaxation session during which lights were dimmed. The experimenter gave specific instructions asking the participants to sit comfortably, relax and close their eyes.

They were asked to breathe deeply and regularly, and to relax all their muscles one by one (shoulders, arms, hands, face,...). Once relaxed, participants had to retrieve a memory (academic success or failure). They were instructed to press a marker as soon as they had retrieved the target memory. The instructions were the following: "Now I'm going to ask you to remember a particular memory as quickly as possible. Once you have a memory in mind, turn on the switch on your table. Then briefly describe your memory on a piece of paper. When you have finished turn off the switch. This way I can check the time you take to retrieve a memory, as well as the moment you are all done. The memory I want you to remember is, in your academic career, an event that you have experienced as a success/failure." After memory retrieval, participants were asked to think during one minute about their emotional state at the time of the evoked memory and to try to relive those emotions. Participants filled in a paper-pencil questionnaire with measures of self-efficacy, specificity of retrieved AM, academic results, and emotional state. They were encouraged to ask questions if needed. Finally, they were fully debriefed and thanked for their participation.

### Measures

#### *Self-efficacy beliefs.*

This scale was constructed on the basis of the "Guide for constructing self-efficacy scales" from Bandura (2001). A 10-point scale (1 = Cannot do, 5 = Moderately certain can do, 10 = Certain can do) Likert-type response format, as recommended by this guide, was used. Bandura (2001) considers that self-efficacy scales must be tailored to activity domains and assess the multifaceted ways in which efficacy beliefs operate within the selected activity domain. In this perspective, we formulated items measuring several skills students need in order to succeed in their

studies (“*How confident are you that you can summarize an entire course?*”) as well as items concerning more generally the achievement of their academic year (“*How confident are you that you can succeed in your exams?*”). By specifying in exploratory factor analysis the extraction of one factor, all the 9 items have large loadings (at least .60) on this unique factor (alpha = .85). We used the mean of the 9 items for all further analyses.

#### *Emotional state.*

This scale consisted in a French translation (Philippot, 1993) of the Differential Emotional Scale (DES) of Izard, Dougherty, Bloxom, and Kotsch (1974). The items consisted of three-word groups of emotional adjectives (e.g., “amused, joyful, merry”, “angry, irritated, mad”). Participants had to rate the strength to which they were feeling, at the moment, those emotions on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = not

at all, 5 = very strongly). Positive emotion items were reversely coded before further analysis. Exploratory factor analysis extracted one component explaining 55% of the total variance and on which all items have large loadings (alpha = .87). The mean of all items was used for further analyses. The higher that score is, the more negative the emotional state that the participant experiences.

#### *Memory specificity.*

Memory specificity was assessed by 4 items: “I remember the exact moment at which the event took place”; “I remember the exact place where the event took place”; “This event took place only once”; “This event lasted less than 24 hours”. To be specific a memory needed to meet those 4 conditions; if one of them was not present, the memory was considered as general. Hence, specificity of memory was a dichotomous variable (specific vs. general).

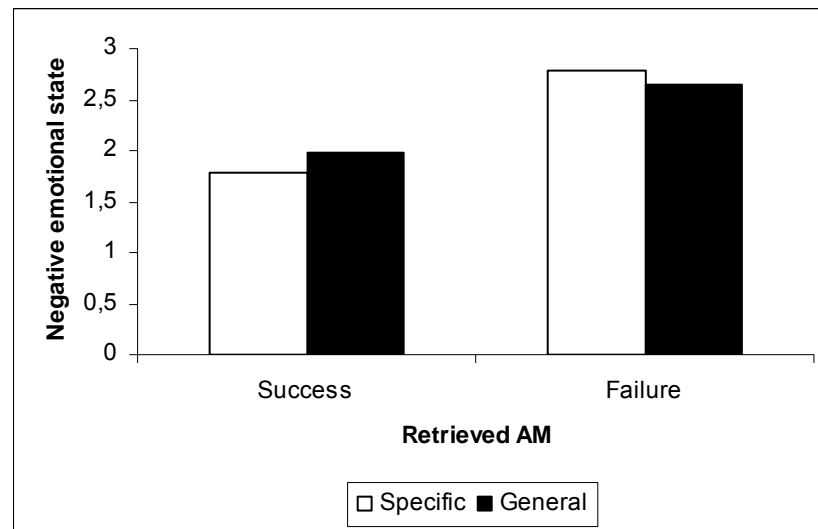
## Results

### Impact of Memory Valence and Specificity on Emotional State

AM manipulation effectiveness was tested by a two-factorial analysis of variance with emotional state as dependent variable and the factors valence (success vs. failure) and specificity (specific vs. general) of AM

as independent variables. A significant main effect for the factor valence ( $F(1, 50) = 29.79, p = .000, \eta^2 = .37$ ) emerged. This main effect indicates that activation of a failure AM leads to more negative emotional state ( $M = 2.72, SD = .11$ ) than activation of a success AM ( $M = 1.88, SD = .11$ ). No other effect or interaction reached significance.



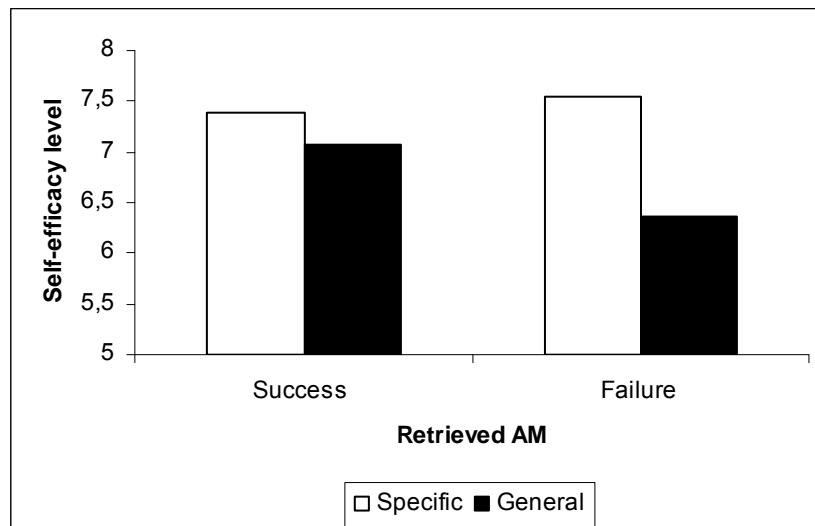


**Figure 1.** Mean negative emotional state after retrieval of a specific success, a general success, a specific failure, or a general failure.

### Impact of Memory Valence and Specificity on Self-Efficacy Beliefs

A 2 x 2 (Valence x Specificity) analysis of variance was performed on self-efficacy scores. This ANOVA yielded a significant main effect of specificity ( $F(1, 50) = 5.34, p = .03, h^2 = .10$ ) but not of valence. The interaction effect was not significant but a tendency for significance seemed to appear ( $F(1, 50) = 2.48, p = .12, h^2 = .05$ ). Thus, post hoc analyses were conducted in order to test if specificity has different impacts on self-efficacy beliefs for failure and success

memories. A significant effect of level of specificity emerged in the failure condition; as can be seen in Figure 2, self-efficacy beliefs are significantly higher after a specific failure memory ( $M = 7.68, SD = .43$ ) than after retrieval of a general failure memory ( $M = 6.37, SD = .31, p = .02$ ). However in the success condition, no significant difference between specific and general memories was observed. These observations are consistent with our prediction that specificity would have a protective effect only in the case of failure memories.



**Figure 2.** Mean self-efficacy level after retrieval of a specific success, a general success, a specific failure, or a general failure.

## Mediation

This study also intended to test whether valence and specificity of AM retrieval have an effect on self-efficacy beliefs through variation of emotional state. According to Baron and Kenny (1986), to be significant a mediating effect requires three conditions: 1) independent variables affect the mediator, 2) independent variables have an effect on the outcome, 3) the mediator affects the outcome. An additional condition is needed: when controlling for the mediator the impact of independent variables on the outcome

is reduced. The above described analyses have evidenced that AM valence affects emotional state but not self-efficacy beliefs, while AM specificity does not influence emotional state but well self-efficacy beliefs. These contrasted effects of the two independent variables on the mediator and the outcome do not support mediation. In addition, regression analyses of self-efficacy on emotional state did not reveal the expected significant effect. It can thus be concluded that there is no mediating effect of AM valence and specificity on self-efficacy beliefs through emotional state



## Discussion

The expected effect of AM specificity on self-efficacy beliefs was evidenced. No difference of specificity level after retrieval of an academic success experience was observed because, in this case, self-efficacy beliefs are not threatened by adverse experiences and do not need to be protected. However, self-efficacy beliefs were significantly higher after a specific academic failure than after a general academic failure. This significant difference between specific and general failures attests that a specific processing helps to maintain high self-efficacy beliefs (there was no significant difference in the success condition) while a general processing has a deleterious effect on self-efficacy beliefs.

Contrary to our expectations, no effect of past performance valence emerged. Thus, whether students activated a failure or a success experience, this had no impact on their self-efficacy beliefs. This suggests that it is not that much the "objective" performance that has an effect on self-efficacy beliefs than the interpretation students make of it. This confirms Bandura's (1997) statement that there is no simple equivalence between mastery experiences and self-efficacy beliefs but that the interpretation of the mastery experiences is of central importance. Mastery experiences are only raw data that need to be cognitively processed for the individual's self-assessment (Pajares, 1996).

Previous observations of an impact of AM specificity on emotional state were not replicated. Two reasons might be invoked for this. First, previous studies manipulated experimentally the specificity level of retrie-

ved memories, while in the present study participants were not constrained to process their past performance at a certain level of specificity; the level of specificity of the retrieved academic success or failure experience was assessed by a self-report measure. Second, this absence of effect could be due to the fact that the present operationalization of emotional state reflected a too large and global notion to be affected by the specificity level of the activated AM. Further, the issue of the study might not have been important enough to the students to have implications for their emotional state. Nevertheless, we observed an expected impact of AM valence on emotional state; retrieving a failure yielded a more negative emotional state than activation of a success experience. Given the absence of an AM specificity effect on emotional state, and the absence of an AM valence effect on self-efficacy beliefs, no mediating effect could be evidenced.

This study suffers some limitations. The main issue rests in the operationalization of AM specificity level. Memory specificity was indeed assessed with a self-report measure that differs from what is usual AM research. Indeed, most researchers use the Autobiographical Memory Test (AMT, Williams & Broadbent, 1986) to measure individuals' AM retrieval style, a measure that does not rely on direct self-report of specificity. Further studies should use the AMT as suggested by literature to measure whether AM specificity level affects individuals' self-efficacy beliefs in the case of adverse experiences.

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