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Prospective memory research: why is it relevant?

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Abstract: Points out that there are at least three reasons why research in prospective memory is highly relevant. Relevance of prospective memory for everyday life; Clinical relevance of prospective memory; Theoretical relevance of prospective memory.

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Prospective memory research: Why is it relevant?

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“Which were the three most important memory problems you had in the last week?”

We have asked this question all participants who attended memory training classes in an adult education institution in a mid-sized German town over the last two years. Of those interviewed, 62 % indicated that at least one of these problems concerned the delayed execution of an intended action, e.g., forgetting to give someone a call. This type of memory tasks has been labelled *prospective memory* tasks and interest in this rather new field of cognitive psychology is growing (Brandimonte, Einstein, & McDaniel, 1996).

There are at least three reasons why research in prospective remembering is highly relevant. (1) As signified by the finding reported above, prospective memory is of great *relevance for everyday life*. Various studies have reported that 50-80% of all everyday memory problems are, at least in part, prospective memory problems (e.g., Crovitz & Daniel, 1984; Terry, 1998). (2) Prospective memory is of enormous *clinical relevance*. In a current study investigating patients attending the Heidelberg Memory Clinic, up to date about 40 % of the patients have reported prospective memory problems as their main symptoms. Moreover, in the last years, several studies addressed the question of prospective memory problems in neuropsychological patients (e.g., Fortin, Godbout, & Braun, 2002). Recent efforts in this context concern the mechanisms of these impairments (see Kopp & Thöne-Otto, this issue) as

well as possible strategies of rehabilitation (see Thöne-Otto & Walter, this issue). (3)

Prospective memory research is of tremendous *theoretical relevance*. Aiming to disentangle prospective memory from the traditional topic of memory research, i.e., the memory for previously learned information or retrospective memory, the question of “To what extent is prospective memory similar to and to what extent is it different from retrospective memory?” (Guynn, McDaniel & Einstein, 2001, p. 25) still remains. However, in addressing this issue, concepts of cognitive functioning in general are being advanced (see Guynn, this issue). In addition, one major focus of prospective memory research has been the life-span development of prospective remembering. Investigating age-effects and possible underlying mechanisms, the influence of executive functioning (see Martin, Kliegel, & McDaniel, this issue), the specific nature of memory for intentions (see Freeman & Ellis, this issue), and the role of motivational aspects (see Kliegel, Martin, & Moor, this issue) are currently being examined.

In sum, the present special issue aims to present a variety of examples of current approaches in the field of prospective memory research. We hope that we will stimulate further research in these and other aspects of the question *Why do we forget to execute intended actions everyday?* Finally, we are very thankful for the support from Laura Hernandez-Guzman, Editor of the International Journal of Psychology, who provided the exceptional opportunity for this special issue, from Melissa Guynn, Markus Heinrichs, Kai Lutz, Fred Mast, and several anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback, and from Caroline Moor for her assistance in the editorial process.

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