

Prospective memory in the fourth age: Evidence from the ALSA Daily Life Time Sampling (ADuLTS) study

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Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

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Table of Contents

Title.....	i
Declaration.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
List of Tables.....	xiii
List of Figures.....	xv
Abstract.....	xvi
Chapter 1: Thesis Overview.....	1
1.0 Overview.....	1
1.1 Ageing in Australia.....	1
1.2 Prospective Memory.....	2
1.3 The ADuLTS Study.....	6
1.4 Studies Providing the Focus for the Current Thesis.....	7
1.4.1 Study 1: Prospective memory in the fourth age.....	8
1.4.2 Study 2: Stress and prospective memory.....	8
1.4.3 Study 3: Cognitive predictors of prospective memory in the fourth age.....	10
1.5 Structure of the Thesis.....	11
1.6 Summary.....	12
Chapter 2: Review of the Prospective Memory Literature.....	14
2.0 Overview.....	14
2.1 Introduction to Prospective Memory.....	14
2.1.1 Characteristics of prospective memory.....	15
2.1.2 Four phase theory of prospective memory processes.....	17
2.1.3 Prospective memory as a unique construct.....	19
2.2 Theories of Prospective Memory.....	21
2.2.1 Spontaneous retrieval mechanisms.....	22
2.2.2 Attentional monitoring mechanisms.....	24
2.2.2.1 PAM: Preparatory attentional monitoring theory.....	25
2.3 The Multiprocess Framework of Prospective Memory.....	29
2.3.1 The Multiprocess Framework and age-related effects in event- based tasks.....	31

2.3.2	The Multiprocess Framework and age-related effects in time-based tasks.....	33
2.3.3	Target cue characteristics and the Multiprocess Framework.....	34
2.3.3.1	Cue focality.....	35
2.3.3.2	Cue regularity.....	36
2.3.3.3	Cue distinctiveness.....	37
2.3.3.4	Length of retention period.....	37
2.4	Rationale for Study 1.....	38
Chapter 3: Study1. Event- and Time-based Prospective Memory in Community Dwelling Oldest-old Adults.....		42
3.0	Overview.....	42
3.1	Introduction to Study 1.....	42
3.1.1	Naturalistic versus laboratory research.....	43
3.1.2	Characteristics of the prospective task and target cue.....	45
3.1.3	Summary.....	48
3.2	Aim of Study 1.....	49
3.3	Hypotheses for Study 1.....	49
3.4	Method.....	49
3.4.1	Participants.....	49
3.4.2	Design.....	51
3.4.3	Materials.....	51
3.4.4	Baseline measures.....	51
3.4.4.1	The Mini-Mental State Examination.....	52
3.4.4.2	The CES-D 10.....	53
3.4.4.3	Self-reported stress.....	53
3.4.5	Time-sampling measures: Questionnaires and saliva samples.....	54
3.4.5.1	Saliva samples.....	54
3.4.5.2	Morning questionnaires.....	54
3.4.5.3	Daily questionnaires.....	56
3.4.5.4	Prospective memory items.....	57
3.5	Procedure.....	58
3.6	Analytic Approach.....	61
3.6.1	Prospective memory measures.....	61

3.6.2	Software.....	61
3.7	Results.....	62
3.7.1	Demographic and descriptive results.....	62
3.7.2	Preliminary analyses of prospective memory performance.....	64
3.7.3	EBPM forgetting and recovery ratios.....	65
3.7.4	Prospective memory performance and age.....	67
3.7.4.1	Prospective memory performance and age group.....	67
3.7.4.2	Prospective memory performance and linear chronological age.....	68
3.8	Discussion.....	73
3.8.1	Limitations and future directions.....	81
3.9	Conclusion.....	83
Chapter 4:	Intra-individual and inter-individual predictors of prospective memory.....	85
4.0	Overview.....	85
4.1	Intra-individual and Inter-individual Constructs Informing Current Research.....	85
4.2	Stress Processes and Prospective Memory: Study 2.....	88
4.2.1	Stress pathways.....	88
4.2.2	Stress processes: The Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenal (HPA) axis.....	88
4.2.3	Stressor exposure and individual reactivity.....	90
4.2.4	Stress, cortisol, ageing, and cognition.....	95
4.2.5	Summary.....	97
4.3	The Association of Executive Function, Working Memory, and Retrospective Memory with Prospective Memory: Study 3.....	98
4.4	Executive Function.....	99
4.4.1	Models of executive function.....	100
4.4.2	Executive function and age-related decline.....	102
4.4.3	Executive function and prospective memory in older age.....	104
4.4.4	Executive function and the dual-process theory.....	108
4.4.5	Summary and rationale for executive function as a predictor of prospective memory.....	110

4.5	Working Memory.....	111
4.5.1	Models of working memory.....	112
4.5.2	Working memory and age-related decline.....	114
4.5.3	Working memory and prospective memory.....	116
4.5.4	Summary and rationale for working memory as a predictor of prospective memory.....	120
4.6	Retrospective Memory.....	121
4.6.1	Summary and rationale for retrospective memory as a predictor of prospective memory.....	124
4.7	Summary and Aim of Study 3.....	124
Chapter 5: Study 2. The effect of stress on prospective memory in the fourth age...		126
5.0	Overview.....	126
5.1	Introduction.....	126
5.2	Rationale for Study 2: Stress, Cortisol, and Prospective Memory.....	128
5.2.1	Stress and prospective memory.....	132
5.3	Hypotheses for Study 2.....	134
5.4	Method.....	136
5.4.1	Participants.....	136
5.4.2	Design.....	136
5.5	Materials.....	136
5.5.1	Baseline measures.....	136
5.5.2	Time sampling measures.....	137
5.5.2.1	Morning and daily questionnaires.....	137
5.5.2.2	Prospective memory items.....	138
5.5.2.3	Cortisol.....	138
5.6	Procedure.....	139
5.7	Overview of cortisol variables.....	139
5.7.1	Cortisol sample completion rate.....	139
5.7.2	Cortisol measures.....	140
5.7.2.1	Area under the curve.....	140
5.7.2.2	Deviation in cortisol at measurement occasion.....	141
5.7.2.3	Intra-individual standard deviation.....	141
5.7.2.4	Cortisol awakening response.....	142

5.8	Results.....	143
5.8.1	Overview.....	143
5.8.1.1	Prospective memory descriptive results.....	143
5.8.1.2	Cortisol descriptive results.....	143
5.8.1.3	Preliminary analyses of major variables.....	144
5.8.2	Statistical model and analytic approach.....	150
5.8.2.1	Overview of multi-level modelling and generalised linear mixed models.....	150
5.8.2.2	Model definition.....	152
5.8.2.3	Software.....	156
5.8.2.4	Covariance structure.....	156
5.8.2.5	Estimation of logit coefficients and probabilities.....	156
5.8.2.6	Model estimation.....	157
5.8.3	Results for focal EBPM models.....	157
5.8.4	Results for non-focal EBPM models.....	164
5.8.5	Results for TBPM analyses.....	168
5.8.6	Summary of results.....	170
5.9	Discussion.....	173
5.9.1	Limitations and future directions.....	183
5.10	Conclusion.....	185
Chapter 6:	Study 3. The association of executive function, working memory, and retrospective memory with prospective memory in the fourth age.....	186
6.0	Overview.....	186
6.1	Introduction.....	186
6.2	Rationale for Study 3.....	187
6.2.1	Executive function.....	187
6.2.2	Working memory.....	193
6.2.3	Retrospective memory.....	196
6.3	Summary.....	198
6.4	Aim of Study 3.....	199
6.5	Hypotheses for Study 3.....	200
6.6	Method.....	201
6.6.1	Participants.....	201

6.6.2	Design.....	202
6.6.3	Materials.....	202
6.6.3.1	Baseline and covariate measures.....	202
6.6.3.2	Digit Symbol Substitution Test.....	203
6.6.3.3	Time sampling and prospective memory measures.....	204
6.6.3.4	Tests of executive function.....	204
6.6.3.4.1	Initial Letter Fluency Test.....	205
6.6.3.4.2	Excluded Letter Fluency Test.....	206
6.6.3.4.3	CLOX 1.....	208
6.6.3.5	Tests of working memory.....	208
6.6.3.5.1	MMSE: Spelling backwards, serial sevens, and 3-stage command.....	208
6.6.3.5.2	Working memory, the MMSE, and covariate predictors.....	210
6.6.3.6	Tests of retrospective memory.....	211
6.6.3.6.1	The MMSE and retrospective memory.....	211
6.6.3.6.2	Digit Symbol Subtest and retrospective memory.....	212
6.7	Procedure.....	213
6.8	Analytic Approach.....	214
6.8.1	Prospective memory measures.....	214
6.8.2	Software.....	214
6.9	Results.....	215
6.9.1	Overview.....	215
6.9.2	Preliminary analyses of prospective memory performance and executive function, working memory, and retrospective memory.....	215
6.9.2.1	Correlation between major variables.....	216
6.9.2.2	Hypothesis testing.....	221
6.9.3	Results of HMR analysis for focal EBPM and executive function, working memory, and retrospective memory.....	223
6.9.3.1	Focal EBPM proportion correct and executive function, working memory, and retrospective memory.....	223
6.9.3.2	Focal EBPM forgetting ratio and executive function, working memory, and retrospective memory.....	224
6.9.3.3	Focal EBPM recovery ratio and executive function, working memory, and retrospective memory.....	225

6.9.4	Results of HMRA for non-focal EBPM and executive function, working memory, and retrospective memory.....	229
6.9.4.1	Non-focal EBPM proportion correct and executive function, working memory, and retrospective memory..	229
6.9.4.2	Non-focal EBPM forgetting ratio and executive function, working memory, and retrospective memory..	229
6.9.4.3	Non-focal EBPM recovery ratio and executive function, working memory, and retrospective memory.....	230
6.9.5	Results of logistic regression analyses for TBPM and executive function, working memory, and retrospective memory.....	234
6.10	Discussion.....	235
6.11	Limitations.....	248
6.12	Conclusion.....	250
Chapter 7:		253
7.0	Overview.....	253
7.1	Introduction.....	253
7.2	Review of major findings from Studies 1, 2, and 3.....	254
7.2.1	Study 1.....	254
7.2.2	Study 2.....	257
7.2.3	Study 3.....	260
7.3	Review of the design and strengths of the ADuLTS study.....	263
7.3.1	Ecological validity.....	263
7.3.2	Micro-longitudinal design.....	264
7.3.3	Ambulatory assessment.....	265
7.4.4	Summary.....	266
7.4	Alternative explanations for the current findings.....	266
7.4.1	Categorisation of the focality of event-based cues.....	267
7.4.2	Perceptual and affective processing of cues.....	268
7.4.3	Contextual theories of prospective memory.....	273
7.4.3.1	Contextual factors and prospective memory.....	273
7.5	Limitations.....	276
7.6	Future directions for research in prospective memory processes in the oldest-old.....	279
7.6.1	Prospective memory in frail oldest-old adults.....	279

7.6.2	Stress reactivity in the oldest-old in laboratory studies.....	280
7.6.3	The influence of social partners in prospective memory performance.....	281
7.6.4	The role of cognitive training and interventions to support prospective memory.....	282
7.6.4.1	The use of interventions and emerging technologies to support prospective memory.....	282
7.6.4.2	Cognitive training and prospective memory.....	284
7.7	Conclusion.....	285
	References.....	287
	Appendices.....	341
	Appendix A: Preliminary forms for participants in the ADuLTS study.....	341
A.1	ADuLTS recruitment letter for ALSA participants.....	342
A.2	ADuLTS recruitment letter for non-ALSA participants.....	343
A.3	ADuLTS information sheet for ALSA participants.....	344
A.4	ADuLTS information sheet for non-ALSA participants.....	345
A.5	Consent form and general information.....	346
	Appendix B: Participant guidelines and instructions.....	349
B.1	Participant guidelines.....	351
B.2	Saliva sample collection instructions.....	353
	Appendix C: Questionnaires and assessment forms.....	355
C.1	Baseline questionnaire.....	356
C.2	Morning questionnaire.....	369
C.3	Daily questionnaires.....	371
C.4	Feedback interview.....	381
	Appendix D: Prospective memory items.....	383
D.1	Prospective memory items.....	384
	Appendix E: Baseline tests administered in the ADuLTS study.....	385
E.1	Mini-Mental State Examination (MMSE).....	386
E.2	Digit Symbol Substitution Test (DSST).....	387

E.3	Digit Symbol Subtest.....	388
E.4	Initial Letter Fluency Test (FAS).....	389
E.5	Excluded Letter Fluency Test (ELF).....	390
E.6	CLOX 1.....	391
Appendix F: Selected SPSS output and analyses for Study 1.....		392
F.1	HMRA of focal EBPM proportion correct with covariate predictors.....	393
F.2	HMRA of non-focal EBPM proportion correct with covariate predictors.....	395
F.3	Logistic regression for TBPM with covariate predictors	397
Appendix G: Selected SPSS output and analyses for Study 2.....		398
G.1	Probability of proficiency on the focal EBPM task across measurement occasions.....	399
G.2	Probability of proficiency on the non-focal EBPM task across measurement occasions.....	400
G.3	Final model (E) of GLMM for focal EBPM, cortisol indices, and covariates.....	401
G.4	Final model (E) of GLMM for non-focal EBPM, cortisol indices, and covariates.....	405
G.5	Logistic regression analysis of TBPM, cortisol indices, and covariates...	409
Appendix H: Selected SPSS output and analyses for Study 3.....		411
H.1	HMRA of focal EBPM proportion correct and executive function, working memory, and retrospective memory.....	412
H.2	HMRA of focal EBPM forgetting ratio and executive function, working memory, and retrospective memory.....	414
H.3	HMRA of focal EBPM recovery ratio and executive function, working memory, and retrospective memory.....	416
H.4	HMRA of non-focal EBPM proportion correct and executive function, working memory, and retrospective memory.....	418
H.5	HMRA of non-focal EBPM forgetting ratio and executive function, working memory, and retrospective memory.....	420
H.6	HMRA of non-focal EBPM recovery ratio and executive function, working memory, and retrospective memory.....	422
H.7	Logistic regression of TBPM and executive function, working memory, and retrospective memory.....	424

List of Tables

Table	3.1.	Participant Descriptive Statistics.	63
Table	3.2.	Percentage of Successful Responses for Prospective Memory Tasks by Age Group.	66
Table	3.3.	Mean Scores for Event-based Prospective Memory Items and Ratios by Age Group.	71
Table	3.4.	Results of Regression Analyses of Proportion Correct of Event-based Prospective Memory Tasks with Age, Gender, Education, and Depressive Symptoms.	72
Table	3.5.	Results of Logistic Regression Analysis of Time-based Prospective Memory and Age, Gender, Education, and Depressive Symptoms.	73
Table	5.1.	Comparative Table of Mean Diurnal Cortisol Levels for All Participants in the Current Study with Levels Previously Reported.	146
Table	5.2.	Sample Mean AUC, CAR, and <i>i</i> SD Cortisol Levels Across Days.	147
Table	5.3.	Between Day Correlations of Average AUC, CAR, and <i>i</i> SD	148
Table	5.4.	Correlations of Sample Mean Cortisol and Descriptive Variables	149
Table	5.5.	Formulae for Transforming Logits and Odds to Probabilities.	156
Table	5.6.	Results of GLMM Analysis of Focal EBPM (Circle Capital Task).	159
Table	5.7.	Results of GLMM Analysis of Non-focal EBPM (Initial Box Task).	166
Table	5.8.	Results of Logistic Regression Predicting Likelihood of Proficiency on TBPM Task.	172
Table	6.1.	Mean and Standard Deviations for Cognitive and Covariate Variables.	217
Table	6.2.	Correlation Matrix of Major Variables with Focal and Non-focal EBPM.	218

Table	6.3	Mean and Standard Deviations for Cognitive and Covariate Variables for ALSA and Non-ALSA Participants.	222
Table	6.4.	Results of HMR Analysis of Focal EBPM Proportion Correct Across Days with Executive Function, Working Memory, and Retrospective Memory.	226
Table	6.5	Results of HMR Analysis of Focal EBPM Forgetting Ratio Across Days with Executive Function, Working Memory, and Retrospective Memory.	227
Table	6.6	Results of HMR Analysis of Focal EBPM Recovery Ratio Across Days with Executive Function, Working Memory, and Retrospective Memory.	228
Table	6.7	Results of HMR Analysis of Non-focal EBPM Proportion Correct Across Days with Executive Function, Working Memory, and Retrospective Memory.	231
Table	6.8	Results of HMR Analysis of Non-focal EBPM Forgetting Ratio Across Days with Executive Function, Working Memory, and Retrospective Memory.	232
Table	6.9	Results of HMR Analysis of Non-focal EBPM Recovery Ratio Across Days with Executive Function, Working Memory, and Retrospective Memory.	233
Table	6.10	Results of Logistic Regression for TBPM and Executive Function, Working Memory, and Retrospective Memory.	235

List of Figures

Figure	1.	Percentage of correct prospective memory responses.	65
Figure	2.	Event-based prospective memory forgetting and recovery ratios.	67
Figure	3.	Mean diurnal cortisol secretion levels across ADuLTS participants.	145
Figure	4.	Contrasting diurnal patterns of cortisol secretion for three ADuLTS participants.	145

Abstract

Prospective memory (PM) is defined as remembering a future delayed intention, for instance, remembering to take medication at the appropriate time or post a letter on the way home from work. As such PM supports day-to-day functioning and is critical for maintenance of independence into older age. In light of mixed findings from laboratory based studies as to the nature and direction of age-related changes in PM and a paucity of research with oldest-old adults, this thesis investigated PM performance in adults over the age of 85 years in naturalistic environments, and examined the effect of bio-physiological and cognitive predictors on performance during a 7-day micro-longitudinal diary study.

In Study 1, PM was examined in terms of task characteristics, target cue focality, and age. Seventy-four participants from the Australian Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ALSA) or a community sample (M age = 88.7 years, range = 84 – 102 years, 68% female) completed six self-report questionnaires daily over seven days. A time-based PM task, and focal and non-focal event-based PM tasks were presented across the week. Performance on event-based tasks was better relative to performance on time-based PM. Although overall proficiency was slightly higher for non-focal PM than for focal PM, there were no significant differences between forgetting and recovery ratios for the two event-based categories. Chronological age showed a small linear association ($r = -.22$) with successful focal PM performance.

The role of interindividual differences and intraindividual variation in physiological stress on PM performance was examined in Study 2. Stress was determined by salivary cortisol levels collected concurrently with each daily questionnaire. Generalised linear mixed modelling showed lower odds of proficiency on focal event-based PM to be associated with a higher cortisol awakening response. Overall,

physiological stress was not a strong predictor of performance. Basal cortisol levels and intraindividual lability in cortisol were not associated with event-based PM. Participants with increased cortisol secretion at task execution showed better time-based PM performance. Interestingly, covariate predictors revealed associations with PM. Higher education predicted performance on focal tasks and higher depressive symptoms were related to poorer time-based performance.

Study 3 found that executive function and working memory were significant predictors of prospective memory. Regression analysis showed performance on focal event-based PM was strongly related to higher executive functioning, with working memory predicting performance on non-focal tasks, after controlling for speed of perceptual processing. Better retrospective memory predicted lower forgetting ratios for event-based PM. Finally, time-based PM showed no association with the three cognitive measures.

These findings indicate that event-based PM is relatively spared in healthy oldest-old adults tested in naturalistic environments, in contrast to marked impairment in time-based PM. However, across the studies, and challenging predicted outcomes, performance on focal event-based tasks was generally poorer than on non-focal tasks and more vulnerable to intraindividual differences in bio-physiological and cognitive factors. Consistent with these findings, results are discussed in terms of dual-task processing and PM – ongoing task interference effects.