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LOOKING BEHIND AND LOOKING AHEAD: PERSONALITY DIFFERENCES IN
COUNTERFACTUAL AND PREFACTUAL THINKING

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Abstract

Counterfactual thinking (CFT) involves the mental simulation of alternatives to the past. In contrast, prefactual thinking (PFT) simulates potential outcomes that have yet to happen. Individuals differ in the extent to which they think in these ways, but we know little about how personality is implicated in these differences. This study investigated the relationship between Big Five personality traits and levels of spontaneous CFT and PFT embedded within a fictional diary entry. Results indicated that CFT was related to high neuroticism and low agreeableness, while PFT was related to low neuroticism and high agreeableness, as well as high extraversion. This suggests that CFT and PFT are, in part, dispositionally based and may be predicted by Big Five measures. This has implications for our understanding of individual differences in terms of the functionality of CFT and PFT and their potential influence on life outcomes.

Keywords: counterfactual thinking; prefactual thinking; Big Five; neuroticism; agreeableness; extraversion

Introduction

Individuals often allow their thoughts to drift from the present moment to the past and the future. When they reflect on the past, they not only recall things that happened but may imagine how they could have happened differently. This imagination of alternatives to reality is known as counterfactual thinking (CFT). CFT often takes the form of “if only ...” thoughts about what might have been, for instance, a student might imagine “*if only I had studied harder, I could have passed my exams*”. Similarly, people reflect on the future, known as prefactual thinking (PFT), imagining different possible outcomes, for instance “*if I work hard for my exam next month, I will pass*” where there is a causal link between an antecedent and consequent (Epstude, Scholl & Roese, 2016). These types of thought can impact on our wellbeing and ongoing behaviour. There is evidence of individual differences in the propensity for individuals to spontaneously engage in counterfactual thinking (Bacon, et al, 2013) and Markman and Miller (2006) have shown counterfactuals may serve different functions for different people. However, although we know these differences exist, we currently know little about what might determine them. The present study is concerned with whether individual differences in the Big Five personality traits (Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness) can account for the tendency towards thinking counterfactually and/or prefactually.

Mental simulation occurs automatically and is a pervasive feature of human thought (Byrne, 2016). Although simulating the future and past may share similar processes (Schacter, Benoit, DeBrigard & Spuznar, 2015) they can have different consequences (De Brigard, Szpunar & Schacter, 2013) and functions (Ferrante, Giroto, Straga & Walsh, 2013). Simulating future possibilities plays a key role in planning and goal-setting (Epstude et al., 2016) by allowing individuals to consider the consequences of different actions and events.

CFT has also been linked to future planning (Epstude & Roese, 2008) but compared to future thoughts, it is more likely to focus on uncontrollable events (Ferrante et al. 2013; Mercier et al., 2017) and in doing so, may also allow individuals to excuse past failures (Byrne, 2016). The CFT that is most functional is that which is self-focussed and which concerns how events might have turned out better (termed upwards CFT). Actions simulated in such thoughts are inherently controllable and retrospective control perceptions can enhance functions such as adaptive preparation, anticipatory planning and behaviour change (Epstude & Roese, 2008; Roese and Morrison, 2009; Nasco & Marsh, 1999).

Counterfactual and prefactual thinking may also have different consequences for affect. When people imagine alternatives to the past, they often compare what happened to what might have been. Thinking about how past events could have been better can therefore lead people to feel worse about how things are (Roese, 1997). This has been associated with negative emotions generally (Bacon, Walsh & Martin, 2013) and specifically feelings such as regret (Roese & Summerville, 2005; Seta and Seta, 2013), blame (Alicke, Buckingham, Zell & Davis, 2008), guilt and shame (Niedenthal, Tangney & Gavanski, 1994), potentially impacting on how well people cope with traumatic events (Davis & Lehman, 1995; Bhushan & Kumar, 2012). Importantly, these relationships hold even after controlling for more general ruminations about the past suggesting that the tendency to engage in CFT is independent of rumination and has important consequences. CFT can also be triggered by low mood (Roese & Hur, 1997) and hence a self-perpetuating cycle of CFT and low mood may result (Roese et al., 2009). In contrast, when people think ahead, they can imagine a future that is still possible. Probably for this reason, imagining a better future is more likely to lead to positive mood (Epstude et al., 2016; Ruby, Smallwood, Engen & Singer, 2013).

Little research to date has focussed on individual differences in the tendency to think counterfactually or prefactually. Understanding these differences is important given their

potential impact on behaviour and mood. In the present study we focus on the Big Five traits, arguably the most widely researched model of personality, yet we know little about the influence of the five traits on CFT and no research has previously considered them in the context of PFT. One early study (Kasimatis & Wells, 1995) found no significant association between CFT and any of the Big Five. However, they did observe positive associations between CFT and low self-esteem, negative affectivity and depression. It is therefore surprising that they report no association with neuroticism, a trait typified by negative emotions such as these. The Big Five model proposes that each trait is underpinned by six subfacets (specific aspects) and that analyses which include scores on these can provide a more fine-grained picture of an individual's trait profile. Our present study extends that of Kasimatis & Wells (1995) by including the Big Five subfacets in our analysis in addition to the main superordinate trait scores.

There is virtually no research into individual differences in the tendency to prefactual thought, and what exists is equivocal. Sanna (1998) suggested that optimists have a greater tendency to think retrospectively about how things could have been worse, while defensive pessimists tend to look to the future, but expect the worst (Sanna, 1998). Conversely however, Smallwood and O'Connor (2011) have shown that a negative mood induction increases thinking about the past, whereas a positive mood induction increased thinking to the future. One study has attempted to examine the relationship between Big Five traits and general forms of thinking in the past, present or future (Fortunato & Furey, 2009). In that study, future thinking correlated positively with extraversion and openness, whereas past thinking correlated positively with neuroticism and negatively with extraversion. The latter results were explained by the general association between extraversion and cheerfulness and positive mood. However, this study used an entirely psychometric method, asking participants to complete a self-report questionnaire on the type of thinking they tend to

employ, and past and future thinking were not operationally defined. In the present study, we specifically examine counterfactual and prefactual thinking using a CFT research paradigm which collects data on participants' spontaneous thoughts in relation to a given event (Bacon et al., 2013; Briazu et al., 2017; McEleney & Byrne, 2006). To date, there is only one study of individual differences using this method (Bacon et al., 2013) which further indicated that CFT was associated with negative emotions.

Overall, there is consistent evidence that CFT is associated with low mood and Fortunato and Furey (2009) reported that thinking about the past is negatively related to Extraversion (a trait generally typified by positive attitudes and mood, Costa & McCrae, 2006), and positively associated with Neuroticism. Individuals high in neuroticism tend to experience negative affect such as sadness, anxiety and depression, as well as fear, embarrassment, anger and disgust (Costa & McCrae, 2006; Widiger, 2009). These can result in poor coping, impulsivity and a range of negative life outcomes (Lahey, 2009). As such, although Kasimatis and Wells (1995) reported no relationship between CFT and trait neuroticism, we proposed that association may be observed if the subfacets of this trait (particularly depression, anxiety and angry-hostility) are examined. Conversely, individuals who think ahead and plan for better future outcomes are assumed to be those with generally more positive and goal-oriented dispositions. Accordingly, Fortunato and Furey (2009) reported positive associations between thinking about the future and both Extraversion and Openness to experience, a trait associated with interest in new experiences and ideas (Costa & McCrae, 2006). We made the following *á priori* predictions:

Prediction 1: CFT will be positively associated with Neuroticism subfacets depression, anxiety and angry-hostility.

Prediction 2: CFT will be negatively associated with Extraversion

Prediction 3: PFT will be negatively associated with Neuroticism.

Prediction 4: PFT will be positively associated with Extraversion

Prediction 5: PFT will be positively associated with Openness to Experience

We also examined individual sub-facets of each traits but made no specific predictions about these at this point.

Methods

Participants

A volunteer sample of 319 undergraduate students (241 female; mean age 20.48 years, $SD = 4.24$) participated in small groups. All were native English speakers and self-declared as not having been clinically diagnosed with any form of psychological disorder.

Measures and Procedures

All participants completed two measures:

Counterfactual/prefactual thinking: Participants read a scenario about moving house to a new job in a new city (from McEleney & Byrne, 2006; Bacon et al, 2013). The scenario described the decisions the protagonist made and various situations which occurred in the first few weeks after the move which resulted in feelings of loneliness and difficulty settling.

Participants were asked to think about the scenario and imagine how they might think and feel were they the protagonist. They were then given 5 minutes to write a free narrative of their thoughts and feelings in the style of a personal diary entry. We counted the number of counterfactuals and prefactuals generated in each narrative. A counterfactual was defined as any thought about how a change to the scenario would change the outcome (McEleney & Byrne, 2006; for instance, “*If only I had gone to that party, I would have made friends*”) and a prefactual as a simulation of what the participant would do differently net time base on the

antecedent in the scenario, e.g. *If I'm invited to another party, I will go*. Two raters independently examined the diary narratives and assessed the number of counterfactuals and prefactuals present in each case. Initial agreement was 88% with the few discrepant cases resolved through discussion. Although the mean number of counterfactual or prefactual thoughts generated by participants in this task is typically quite low (typically between 0 and 4; McEleney & Byrne, 2006, Bacon et al., 2013), it is a useful way to examine the general extent to which people tend to think spontaneously and naturally. Given the negative outcome, the majority of the counterfactuals generated tend to be of the upwards form (i.e. imagining how things might have been better) and self-referent (i.e. *If only I had/had not...*). These are generally considered to be the most functional thoughts as they infer controllability of action and a measure of these is therefore ideal for the present purposes. A copy of the scenario and instructions is presented in the appendix.

The *NEO-PI-R* UK edition (Costa & McCrae, 2006) presents 240 self-report items each rated on a five-point Likert scale from 0 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The measure yields scores for each of the Big Five superordinate traits and for each of the six sub-facet underpinning each trait. The current data showed good internal consistency for each of the superordinate scales: Neuroticism $\alpha = .91$, Extraversion $\alpha = .86$, Openness $\alpha = .84$, Agreeableness $\alpha = .84$, Conscientiousness $\alpha = .93$.

Results

The mean number of spontaneous counterfactuals observed was 1.23 ($SD = 1.06$) and the mean number of prefactual thoughts was .73 ($SD = 1.10$). CFT and PFT were not significantly associated ($r = .03$, $p = .56$). Table 1 presents correlations between these measures, the Big Five superordinate traits and their sub-facets.

Table 1. Correlations between CFT, PFT and the Big Five traits and sub-facets.

Trait/subfacet	CFT	PFT
Neuroticism	.14*	-.15*
Extraversion	.05	.15*
Openness	.01	.04
Agreeableness	-.15*	.13*
Conscientiousness	.02	.06
N1 Anxiety	.15*	-.10
N2 Angry hostility	.21*	-.11*
N3 Depression	.05	-.13*
N4 Self-consciousness	.09	-.12*
N5 Impulsiveness	.04	-.10
N6 Vulnerability	.09	-.12*
E1 Warmth	-.01	.16*
E2 Gregariousness	.03	.08
E3 Assertiveness	.10	.12*
E4 Activity	.09	.07
E5 Excitement seeking	-.02	.09
E6 Positive emotions	.03	.13*
O1 Fantasy	.10*	.002
O2 Aesthetics	-.06	.003
O3 Feelings	.04	-.03
O4 Actions	-.03	.05
O5 Ideas	-.01	.06
O6 Values	.04	.08
A1 Trust	-.15*	.06
A2 Straightforwardness	-.17*	.16*
A3 Altruism	-.02	.12*
A4 Compliance	-.08	.07
A5 Modesty	-.02	.06
A6 Tender-mindedness	-.11*	.02
C1 Competence	.04	.06
C2 Order	.01	-.002
C3 Dutifulness	-.03	.02
C4 Achievement striving	.05	.02
C5 Self-discipline	-.01	.07
C6 Deliberation	-.08	.04

In terms of the superordinate traits, neither CFT nor PFT showed any significant associations with either openness or conscientiousness. As predicted however, CFT was positively, and

PFT negatively associated with Neuroticism. In addition, we observed a positive correlation between extraversion and PFT, but not CFT. Both forms of thinking were associated with agreeableness, for CFT the relationship was negative, while for PFT it was positive. In terms of the facet correlations in Table 1, we can see that CFT is positively associated with N1 and N2 (anxiety and anger respectively) whilst PFT shows negative associations with all neuroticism facets except N1 (anxiety) and N5 (impulsiveness) where the association does not reach significance. For agreeableness, Table 2 indicates negative associations between CFT and A1 (trust), A2 (straightforwardness) and A6 tender-mindedness), while PFT shows positive associations between agreeableness facets A2 (straightforwardness) and A3 (altruism). PFT also presents a positive correlations with Extraversion facets E1 (warmth), E3 (assertiveness) and E6 (positive emotions).

The results of regression analyses are shown in Table 2. We first examined the effects of the Big Five superordinate traits on CFT and PFT in turn. These accounted for 3% variance in CFT and 5% in PFT. In both cases, significant independent effects of Agreeableness were indicated, a negative effect on CFT and a positive one for PFT. A positive effect of neuroticism on CFT was observed, and a negative effect on PFT. Extraversion shared variance with PFT but showed no effects on CFT. We conducted further regressions with the thirty individual facet scores. In this case, due to the relatively large number of independent variables, we used a forward stepwise method and the results are also shown in Table 2. Variance in CFT was accounted for by facets N2 (anger; positive) and A2 (straightforwardness; negative). In PFT, variance was explained by three facets, E1 (warmth; positive), N3 (depression; negative) and A2 (straightforwardness; positive).

Table 2. Results of regression analyses on CFT and PFT. In each case, analysis one tests the Big Five superordinate traits and analysis 2 the subfacets of the five traits.

		St. β	t	p	95% Confidence interval		Adj. R ²
					lower	upper	
Counterfactual thinking							
1	N	.19	3.14	.002	.003	.01	
	E	.11	1.74	.08	-.001	.01	
	O	.001	.02	.98	-.01	.01	
	A	-.15	-2.72	.01	-.02	-.003	
	C	.11	1.89	.06	-.002	.01	
2	N2	.18	3.32	.001	.01	.05	
	A2	-.15	-2.65	.01	-.05	-.01	
Prefactual thinking							
1	N	-.11	-1.70	.09	-.01	.001	
	E	.11	1.84	.07	-.003	.01	
	O	-.001	-.02	.99	-.01	.01	
	A	.12	2.09	.03	-.004	.01	
	C	-.003	-.04	.97	-.01	.01	
2	N3	.12	2.09	.04	.002	.06	
	E1	.15	2.75	.01	.01	.06	
	A2	-.13	-2.25	.03	-.04	-.003	

Discussion

The present study is the first to examine the Big Five personality traits as potential explanations for individual differences in the tendency towards both counterfactual thinking and prefactual thinking. In sum, our results suggest that contrasting levels of neuroticism and agreeableness can differentiate between a tendency towards one or other form of thought.

PFT was also associated with higher levels of extraversion.

Neuroticism was positively associated with levels of CFT, but negatively with PFT. This falls in line with our predictions and with previous research which has shown that CFT

is related to low mood states and PFT with more positive ones. Examination of the facet scores allowed for a more fine-grained analysis. This revealed that scores on facets N1 (anxiety) and N2 (angry hostility) were both associated with higher levels of CFT though only the latter explained variance in CFT independently of the other facets. This facet (N2, angry-hostility) refers to the tendency to experience anger and hostility but also related states such as bitterness and frustration. We can imagine how looking back at a negative outcome might trigger such feelings. Individuals high in neuroticism are motivated to avoid potential threats, and other research has shown that people with a high level of prevention focus (risk-averse and maintain the status quo in order to remain safe) focus on past experiences, rather than thinking about future goals (e.g. Higgins, 1998). This further supports the idea that negative emotionality is closely associated with dwelling on the past. Moreover, there is evidence that counterfactual related regret for actions taken can trigger what have been termed “hot emotions”, including anger, frustration, embarrassment (Gilovich, Medvec & Kahneman, 1998; Kedia & Hilton, 2011). In addition, individuals who score highly on N2 (angry-hostility) tend to be lower in agreeableness (Costa & McCrae, 2006) which was also associated with CFT in the present data. Overall, the link between Neuroticism and CFT is more complex than a mutual association with negative affect and, given the poor life outcomes associated with neuroticism, is worthy of further study. It may be that excessive counterfactual thinking, together with associated rumination, may help to explain the mechanisms by which neuroticism and outcomes are linked.

The finding that low agreeableness was associated with a higher rate of CFT is an interesting result that we had not predicted. Costa and McCrae (2006) describe agreeableness as a dimension of interpersonal tendencies whereby high scores indicate altruism and a positive view of human nature (though also possible overdependency and gullibility) while low scores reflect antagonism, cynicism and a tendency towards competition rather than

cooperation, fitting given the established association between CFT and negative mood.

Examination of the agreeableness facet data revealed that CFT was negatively correlated with facets A1 (trust), A2 (straightforwardness) and A6 (tender-mindedness), though only A2, shared a significant amount of independent variance with CFT in regression, reflecting a lack of straightforwardness in dealings with others, a willingness to be manipulative and disingenuous. Interestingly, recent research by Briazu, Walsh, Ganis and Deeproose (2017) has shown that individuals with a tendency to lie also seem to generate more counterfactual thoughts. Like counterfactual thinking, some forms of lying require imagination of an alternative to past events. In direct contrast, agreeableness scores were positively associated with PFT.

In addition, PFT was positively associated with extraversion as predicted. Extraverts are sociable, outgoing and talkative, they like excitement and stimulation and tend to be optimistic and cheerful. The facet-level correlations indicated this effect was driven by facets E1 (warmth), E2 (gregariousness), E3 (assertiveness) and E6 (positive emotions). However, only E1 (warmth) was shown to share independent variance with PFT in our regression analysis. We also anticipated that PFT would be related to openness to experience and the possibility of a range of potential future outcomes. Our results here suggest these characteristics are more typical of those captured by the trait of extraversion, rather than openness to experience as we had originally anticipated.

In terms of the positive associations between CFT and neuroticism and between PFT and extraversion our results reflect those of Fortunato & Furey's (2009) psychometric study. Their other finding, that openness is related to future thinking was not observed. However, their thinking questionnaire included items such as "*People think of me as a visionary*" and "*I am known for invention/innovation*". These items may reflect creativity as much as past or future thinking and, given that creativity and intellectual curiosity are intrinsic to openness, it

is perhaps unsurprising the two were related in that study. We did not predict a link between Openness and CFT, and did not observe one in terms of the superordinate trait. However, we did observe a modest, though significant, positive association between facet O1 (openness to fantasy) and CFT. In retrospect however this might have been predicted given that Bacon et al (2013) reported an association between CFT (using the same measure) and fantasy proneness, a trait associated with an active fantasy life and imagination. In addition, the cognitive need for closure is found to be negatively associated with thinking of alternative outcomes to events (Hirt, Kardes & Markman, 2004) and also with Openness (Stalder, 2007). This evidence only suggests indirect evidence for a CFT-openness association, however may be worthy of further study. Stalder (2007) highlights how need-for-closure can be differentiated into two subfactors which inversely correlate with Openness. How these factors are associated with CFT and PFT might form a useful focus for further research.

The one trait which did not feature at all in our analysis was Conscientiousness. Previous work has not suggested any link between this and CFT or PFT, though we might hypothesise that conscientious individuals (those who are organised, determined and strive to achieve) may wish to learn from past mistakes and set goals for future improvement. However, neither superordinate trait scores, not those for any of the subfacets of conscientiousness showed any relationship with the tendency towards CFT or PFT. Again, a more fine-grained analysis than is possible here may reveal some useful associations.

In the above analysis we have tended to assume that personality drives thinking and, because our data is correlational, we need to consider potential inverse effects. Whilst the Big Five traits are generally considered to be fairly inherent, it may be possible that CFT or PFT can precede emotions that we associate with certain traits. For instance, it has been suggested that CFT can trigger negative moods, such as when thoughts about how things might have turned out better generate high levels of regret (Roese, Park, Smallman, & Gibson, 2008;

Roese & Morrison, 2009). Roese et al. (2008) state that the correlational nature of their data precludes a definitive assignment of causation and that CFT may be part of a cyclical process of negative affect and problem-focused cognition (Roese et al., 2008). As noted earlier, thinking about the future has also been shown to precede positive mood, even if thoughts are themselves negative (Ruby et al., 2013). Nevertheless, our findings are novel and informative and suggest some fundamental individual differences in how personality may impact across the two forms of thinking. Exactly how specific traits function in this way will be a useful focus of for future research.

Finally, our findings may have implications for the functional theory of CFT. For instance, retrospective control perceptions can enhance functions such as adaptive preparation, anticipatory planning and behaviour change (Epstude & Roese, 2008; Roese and Morrison, 2009; Nasco & Marsh, 1999) and both control perceptions and positive imagery are known to be protective of mental health and helpful in coping after stressful events (Taylor, Kemeny, Reed, Bower & Gruenewald, 2000). Markman & Miller (2006) showed that CFT depleted perceptions of outcome control in depressed patients, suggesting that CFT may be less functional with increasing depressive symptomology. Potentially, this may be also be the case with high Neuroticism and present further motivation for research such as this into the role of personality traits. Future research might usefully explore more specifically the ways in which Neuroticism and agreeableness impact on functional counterfactual outcomes.

Our findings raise the question as to why Kasimatis and Wells (1995) reported no significant associations between the Big Five and counterfactual thinking. They reported upwards counterfactuals (those we focus on here) as well as downward counterfactuals (those where people simulate worse potential outcomes), however used different methodology in that they included scenarios with positive and neutral as well as negative outcomes. They

state that the tendency to think counterfactually was consistent across time and scenario type (i.e. people who generate a lot of counterfactuals in one scenario, also do in others) and report data reflecting only this general tendency, rather than for the different scenario types. It is probable that averaging the number of counterfactuals generated across all scenarios may have masked some effects. Furthermore, they do not discuss subfacets of the Big Five traits. A future study could examine the relationship between the Big Five, their subfacets and both counterfactuals and prefactuals generated across scenarios with different outcomes.

The study is not without some limitations, particularly the use of a single scenario with a negative outcome, which does not readily allow for the examination of downwards counterfactuals or the content of those counterfactual or prefactual thoughts. However, we wanted to directly compare the tendency towards CFT and PFT and the latter does not tend to be observed in a downwards form – people don't plan ahead for worse outcomes.

Nevertheless, we recognise the need for further studies to extend this line of enquiry and we have suggested some in this discussion. A related point is that according to the functional approach, CFT as well as PFT works to prepare people for future events (Epstude & Roese, 2008; Smallman & Roese, 2009) and as such we would expect an association between CFT and PFT which was not observed in the present study. It is likely that such an association would be observed were we to study the overlapping content of counterfactual and prefactual thoughts and whether the Big Five traits mediate the relationship. The content of counterfactuals has been found to vary between focus on past and future, for instance Choi and Markman (2018) showed that reflection on events from the perspective of understanding the past (versus preparing for the future) tended to elicit more subtractive CFT (*I wish I had not...*) than additive CFT (*I wish I had...*). These trends might also vary between individuals as a function of personality traits. Our scenario does not provide rich enough data for such an

analysis and we recommend that future studies incorporate methods which capture more detail of the focus and direction of thoughts generated.

In conclusion, this is the first study to identify a clear relationship between CFT, PFT and Big Five traits. Given the ubiquity of the Big Five in individual differences research, understanding their correlates is important for the ongoing development of personality theory. Moreover, neuroticism is known to predict an array of negative life outcomes for health and wellbeing (Lahey, 2009; Widiger, 2009). CFT in particular may be one of the mechanisms which influence these outcomes and further work to examine this possibility is desirable. That PFT is associated with consistent personality traits characterised by positive mood and interpersonal tendencies is an important new finding and one which might usefully inform interventions to change unfavourable cognitions and develop more positive methods of thought.

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APPENDIX

The scenario and instructions presented to participants. After reading the scenario, participants were given 5 minutes to write their diary entry.

Diary Task

Please read the scenario below and imagine that the events really happened to you. Then write about the imagined experience as if you were writing in your diary. Include your thoughts and feelings about all the events and the outcome.

You're moving house to start a new job in a different city. The night before you leave, you write down your feelings about the move in your diary:

“I've got mixed feelings about moving to a place where I hardly know anyone - my friends and social life are *so* important to me. But I'm sure it will be easy to settle into the new town – I've never had any trouble making new friends.”

A lot happens in your first two weeks in the new town. During your first week at work, a staff dinner is held. You decide to go because you want to get to know your colleagues. You enjoy the evening and meet a lot of people.

That weekend, your next-door neighbours invite you to a party. Most of the people who live on your road will be there. However, that evening you decide to go to the cinema instead.

The next week you decide to ring an old friend who lives in the town and ask him to show you around. You arrange to go out with him the following evening and he introduces you to a lot of his friends.

A few days later, a colleague tells you there's a membership vacancy at her sports club. You think joining would be a good way to meet people, but then you decide to spend the money on a new stereo instead.

Six weeks after the move, things have turned out nothing like you had expected. You haven't made any real friends in the new town and you feel very lonely and isolated. You are very upset and very surprised.