The Temporal Feedback Loop: A Recursive Model of Emotionally Modulated Simulation

Jason Brisart

Independent Researcher

jason@brisartresearcharchive.com

www.brisartresearcharchive.com

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Abstract

The continuity of conscious experience across time remains a central challenge in cognitive neuroscience. The Temporal Feedback Loop (TFL) framework addresses this by proposing that consciousness arises from a recursive neurocomputational process that integrates memory retrieval, current sensory input, and predictive simulation within brief temporal windows (approximately 100–300 milliseconds). These cycles are affectively modulated, generating self-sustaining representations that persist until resolved through perceptual confirmation, behavioral action, or cognitive reinterpretation.

Central to TFL is the hypothesis that affectively salient thoughts encode predictive simulations, which remain active within the loop until incoming feedback affirms or contradicts their simulated content. Belief is defined as a cognitive-affective prior that modulates the loop by biasing attention, shaping memory retrieval, and constraining simulated outcomes. Crucially, the framework proposes that external events—whether self-initiated or passively observed—recursively influence internal loop dynamics through registration and internal simulation, thereby expanding the explanatory power of the model.

TFL integrates findings from hippocampal-prefrontal dynamics, affective salience encoding, predictive processing, and memory reconsolidation. It introduces a formal loop architecture, provides falsifiable predictions, and outlines empirical scenarios suitable for experimental testing. Rather than framing consciousness as a linear stream, TFL conceptualizes it as a dynamic, recursive system governed by belief-weighted inference and continuous feedback.

1.0 Introduction

The continuity of conscious experience across time—despite the dynamic nature of sensory input, memory access, and internal state fluctuations—presents a central challenge in systems neuroscience and cognitive theory (Friston, 2010; Varela et al., 1991). While models such as predictive coding, global workspace theory, and attention schema theory provide mechanisms for moment-to-moment processing, they often leave under-specified how internally generated content, episodic memory, and anticipated outcomes are maintained and integrated across time.

This paper proposes the Temporal Feedback Loop (TFL): a neurocognitive framework in which conscious experience is structured through a recursive process that integrates present sensory input, retrieved memory, and future-oriented simulations within discrete temporal windows. Rather than treating cognition and perception as linear or sequential processes, TFL models them as elements within a closed-loop system—where each phase of processing recursively informs and updates the next.

In this model, affectively salient internal representations—including memory traces, beliefs, and simulated future outcomes—are maintained and updated through looped interaction between hippocampal, prefrontal, and subcortical circuits. These representations persist within the system until resolved through behavior, feedback alignment, or internal reappraisal. Importantly, loop resolution does not require overt action: simulations may deactivate following affective recognition or perceptual mirroring in the environment.

TFL is grounded in several mechanistic assumptions:

1. Affective salience acts as a loop amplifier, increasing the persistence, weighting, and likelihood of reactivation for internal representations.
2. Belief functions as a structural constraint within the loop, shaping the content of memory retrieval, attentional focus, and simulation parameters.
3. Feedback closure can be achieved through direct action, environmental observation, or affective reinterpretation.

In this framework, the self is not modeled as a static entity, but as a temporal reference point through which recursive updates are integrated. Perception emerges as the output of loop convergence, shaped by prior encoding, affective modulation, and simulated expectations. Behavior, likewise, reflects not just reactive motor output, but the recursive closure of internally maintained simulations.

The remainder of this paper formalizes the loop architecture, situates it within known neuroanatomical dynamics, presents empirical predictions, and outlines how recursive feedback models can account for conscious coherence, motivational persistence, and simulation-based behavior.

2.0 Core Mechanism

The Temporal Feedback Loop (TFL) framework is grounded in neurocognitive evidence demonstrating that perception, memory, and prediction are continuously integrated through recursive interactions between brain regions involved in episodic reconstruction, salience processing, and future-oriented simulation. This section outlines the neurobiological substrates that support the TFL model, emphasizing hippocampal–prefrontal communication, affective salience modulation, and simulation-driven prediction.

2.1. Hippocampal–Prefrontal Circuitry and Temporal Reconstruction

The hippocampus is critical for episodic memory retrieval, spatial context reconstruction, and imagination of future events (Addis et al., 2007; Hassabis & Maguire, 2007). Within the TFL model, the hippocampus functions as a dynamic reconstruction engine—reactivating prior experiences and relevant associative content during both perception and planning.

Sharp-wave ripple (SWR) activity in the hippocampus supports the temporally compressed reactivation of learned sequences and anticipated outcomes during rest and awake decision states (Jadhav et al., 2012; Pfeiffer & Foster, 2013). These replays provide the informational substrate—denoted Minfo(t) in the model—which is transmitted to the prefrontal cortex (PFC) for integration with current sensory data and simulation construction.

2.2. Prefrontal Cortex: Integration, Value Assignment, and Feedback Biasing

The prefrontal cortex serves as a high-level integrator—receiving input from sensory cortices, hippocampal memory retrieval, and subcortical affective signals. In the TFL loop, the PFC combines Input(t), Minfo(t), and current affective state E(t) to generate an updated internal representation F(t) that guides ongoing perception and behavior.

Prefrontal regions, particularly the medial and orbitofrontal cortices, are involved in assigning salience, weighting predictive scenarios, and evaluating congruence between simulated expectations and incoming input (Miller & Cohen, 2001). Moreover, PFC–hippocampal feedback projections are capable of modulating subsequent memory access (Place et al., 2016), allowing for recursive loop stability and context-sensitive simulation refinement.

2.3. Affective Salience as Loop Modulator

Affective salience functions as a gain-control mechanism within the loop. Signals with high affective intensity—whether appetitive or aversive—are preferentially encoded, rehearsed, and reactivated (Dolcos et al., 2005). In the TFL framework, E(t) represents this affective-autonomic weighting, which dynamically modulates the persistence and reentry of specific simulations.

Unresolved, high-salience simulations may remain latent within the system and re-emerge in conditions of contextual overlap or cognitive drift. This aligns with findings in affective neuroscience showing selective memory consolidation and biased future projection based on emotional load (Dunsmoor et al., 2015; Gilbert & Wilson, 2007). Affectively modulated content resists extinction and continues to shape perception and decision-making unless resolved through behavioral action or internal reinterpretation.

2.4. Simulation and Predictive Construction

The brain continuously generates forward models of possible future states, using past experience and current context as priors (Clark, 2013; Schacter et al., 2017). In the TFL loop, this is formalized as Sim(t)—a predictive representation influenced by both memory (Minfo) and affective weighting (E(t)).

Neuroimaging studies show that future simulation recruits the same neural architecture as episodic memory and real-time decision making, implicating the hippocampus, medial PFC, and parietal networks (Hassabis et al., 2007). TFL extends this by asserting that these simulations persist recursively until resolved—either through environmental confirmation, motor output, or affective downregulation.

2.5. Summary

The TFL framework is consistent with core findings in systems neuroscience:

- Hippocampal–prefrontal loops support the retrieval and contextualization of episodic content
- Affective modulation gates the persistence of representations
- Predictive simulations bias perception, attention, and decision-making

The next section formalizes the recursive loop using symbolic variables and defines conditions under which simulations persist, escalate, or resolve.

3.0 Internal Processing Dynamics

The Temporal Feedback Loop (TFL) framework proposes that conscious continuity and self-referential perception emerge from a recursive integration of sensory input, memory reactivation, predictive simulation, and affective modulation. This section formalizes the core components of the loop, the phases of its operation, and the conditions under which internal simulations stabilize, escalate, or resolve.

3.1. Formal Components of the Loop

The TFL loop operates over discrete temporal windows (~100–300 ms) and is defined by five core variables:

- Input(t): Real-time sensory information available at time t
- Minfo(t): Contextually relevant memory traces retrieved via hippocampal reactivation
- E(t): The affective-autonomic state at time t (e.g., valence and intensity), functioning as a gain control parameter
- Sim(t): A predictive simulation constructed from Input(t), Minfo(t), and E(t), representing an anticipated or desired future state
- F(t): The integrated internal representation of the present moment—what is experienced as the “felt now”

These elements interact through a recursive integration function:

F(t) = Integration[Input(t), Minfo(t), Sim(t), E(t)]

Where Integration refers to prefrontal synthesis of perceptual input, memory-based priors, and affective signals. This function produces the current conscious state and feeds back into subsequent loop cycles.

3.2. Loop Phases

The loop operates across four primary stages:

(1) Encoding Phase

A stimulus, thought, or belief enters awareness. If accompanied by elevated affective salience, it is preferentially encoded into the loop. The intensity of E(t) modulates the likelihood of persistent reactivation.

(2) Integration Phase

The encoded representation is integrated with retrieved memory content (Minfo) and current sensory input (Input). This gives rise to a forward simulation (Sim), which may influence perception implicitly or be consciously imagined.

(3) Propagation Phase

If unresolved, the simulation continues to propagate within the loop. It may re-emerge, intensify, or adapt based on ongoing sensory input or internal shifts.

These loop cycles can occur at multiple timescales—from sub-second micro-loops (e.g., in motor preparation or attention shifts) to delayed reactivation over hours or days. This flexibility allows the system to maintain unresolved simulations until closure is achieved.

(4) Resolution Phase

The loop resolves when one of the following occurs:

- Behavioral enactment confirms or completes the simulation
- Environmental input mirrors or disconfirms the anticipated outcome
- The simulation loses affective salience and no longer recycles
- Cognitive reinterpretation alters the simulation’s perceived validity

Once resolution occurs, the simulation is discharged from the loop. Affective weighting decays, attention reallocates, and the system is free to initiate new recursive cycles.

4.0 Applications and Predictions

While the core loop model specifies the structural operation of recursive integration, its functional behavior depends on the affective weighting of internal representations and the structuring role of belief. This section details how simulated scenarios influence perception and behavior, how beliefs constrain loop architecture, and how simulation content is propagated or extinguished based on feedback and prediction.

4.1. Affective Salience and Simulation Persistence

Internally generated simulations—whether visualized outcomes, behavioral intentions, or hypothetical narratives—are central to loop function. Simulations with low affective salience tend to decay rapidly, whereas those with high E(t) values are more likely to persist across loop cycles.

These simulations:

- Bias attention and memory retrieval
- Alter the perceptual interpretation of ambiguous stimuli
- Recur as latent priors, influencing future decision-making or motivation

Simulations with unresolved affective charge function as open loops, remaining active until they are behaviorally completed, perceptually confirmed, or internally reinterpreted.

4.2. Belief as a Structural Encoding Mechanism

Beliefs are operationalized in TFL as affectively stabilized priors—structured assumptions about the self, others, or the environment that shape inference and guide simulation generation. Once stabilized through repeated reinforcement and high affective weighting, beliefs modify loop function by:

- Biasing Minfo(t) retrieval toward confirmatory content
- Constraining Sim(t) to outcome patterns aligned with the belief
- Filtering Input(t) in a manner that increases confirmatory salience

This recursive alignment fosters self-confirming dynamics: beliefs influence perception, and perception reaffirms belief. Over time, belief-congruent simulations dominate loop propagation, creating internally coherent but potentially distorted feedback cycles.

4.3. Role Simulation and Identity Convergence

Identity is framed within TFL as a temporally extended, simulation-based construct. When an agent enacts or internally affirms statements like “I am reliable” or “I’m always overlooked,” the affectively congruent simulation is encoded and propagated.

If E(t) supports the statement:

- The simulation is rehearsed across loop cycles
- Behavior aligns to reinforce the role
- Social or environmental feedback closes the loop, further stabilizing the identity

This recursive loop between simulation, affective salience, and feedback forms the basis for identity convergence—where transient simulations become stable components of self-concept.

4.4. Simulation Reentry and Latent Execution

Simulations do not require immediate execution to remain functionally active. A thought such as “I want to go for a walk” may arise, pass, and later re-emerge as spontaneous motivation. These cases illustrate delayed simulation reentry, where loop contents persist until reactivation conditions align (e.g., context, affective readiness, attention bandwidth).

This mechanism explains time-displaced behaviors that appear internally consistent but lack conscious planning, supporting the view that simulation encoding precedes behavioral expression and can occur on a delayed feedback cycle.

4.5. Distributed Feedback and Observational Resolution

Simulations can resolve without direct action when externally mirrored in observed events. For example, a simulation of conflict may resolve when the agent passively witnesses an equivalent conflict elsewhere and affectively registers the match. TFL proposes that observational resolution is sufficient to close a loop when recognition and affective response co-occur.

This aligns with empirical findings in affective resonance and vicarious learning, where observed scenarios elicit emotional or motivational closure.

5.0 Limitations and Future Work

While the Temporal Feedback Loop (TFL) provides a compelling account of recursive consciousness, several challenges remain. The model's abstract structure needs further quantification for empirical testing, particularly in neuroimaging and behavioral experiments. Additionally, emotional weighting is currently conceptual rather than computational, requiring operational definitions for implementation in AI or experimental psychology.

5.1 Neural Precision and Mechanistic Resolution

TFL is grounded in well-established circuit-level processes (e.g., hippocampal–prefrontal reactivation, affective modulation), but lacks fine-grained mapping across brain regions and temporal dynamics.

Future directions:

- Use intracranial recordings and time-resolved fMRI to characterize SWR-driven updates and PFC integration within individual loop cycles.
- Investigate whether high-affect simulations preferentially engage medial PFC–amygdala pathways compared to neutral simulations.
- Examine ventral attention and salience networks as mediators of distributed loop closure during observational feedback events.

5.2 Quantification of Simulation Persistence

Although TFL posits that affectively salient simulations persist across time, operationalizing internal simulation strength remains methodologically difficult.

Potential approaches:

- Use experience sampling and ecological momentary assessment (EMA) to track affective tone and recurrent thought patterns.
- Apply passive physiological monitoring (e.g., skin conductance, pupil dilation, HRV) to infer simulation reentry.
- Train machine learning models on fMRI/EEG data to decode internal simulation content.

5.3 Experimental Designs for Loop Validation

Key mechanisms—like delayed behavioral reentry, identity convergence, and observational resolution—are conceptually testable but require novel paradigms.

Experimental strategies:

- Simulation-priming tasks with delayed execution tracking
- Role-framing studies evaluating identity-congruent behavior
- Vicarious closure paradigms triggered by environmental confirmation

5.4 Ethical Implications of Belief Encoding

Because TFL posits beliefs as modifiable internal simulations, care must be taken in applying this to interventions or training.

Ethical guidelines:

- Reframing over implantation
- Positive/neutral constructs over negative
- Post-intervention debriefing and regulation protocols

5.5 Integration with Broader Network Models

TFL is not meant to replace large-scale consciousness models (e.g., Global Workspace or Temporo-Spatial theories) but rather to complement them.

Future questions:

- How do TFL dynamics interact with DMN–CEN transitions?
- Do recursive loops behave differently during REM sleep, dissociation, or psychedelics?
- Can TFL principles be scaled to collective cognition?

5.6 Summary

TFL is a biologically grounded and testable recursive model of thought and identity encoding, but further work is required in experimental, ethical, and computational dimensions.

5.7 Comparative Theoretical Models

To position TFL within contemporary theory, this section compares it to Predictive Coding (PC), Global Workspace Theory (GWT), and the Temporo-Spatial Theory of Consciousness (TTC).

Predictive Coding (PC):

- Similarities: Recursive inference; simulation; error-based updating
- Differences: TFL encodes affect (E(t)); supports identity modeling; explains loop persistence

Global Workspace Theory (GWT):

- Similarities: Limited content bandwidth; recursive access
- Differences: TFL explains why content recurs; supports simulation propagation; affect-driven resolution

Temporo-Spatial Theory of Consciousness (TTC):

- Similarities: Temporal integration; spontaneous neural dynamics
- Differences: TTC is descriptive; TFL is functional and predictive; includes symbolic modeling

Summary Comparison Table:

Feature	**TFL**	**PC**	**GWT**	**TTC**

Recursive integration	Yes	Yes	Partial	Yes
Affective modulation	Yes	No	Peripheral	Indirect
Simulation persistence	Yes	Partial	No	No
Role/identity modeling	Yes	No	No	Partial
Time-delayed loop behavior	Yes	No	No	Yes
Perception of observed resolution	Yes	No	No	No
Formal symbolic model	Yes	Often	No	No

6.0 Final Synthesis

The Temporal Feedback Loop framework represents more than a theoretical model of recursive cognition; it lays the groundwork for a unifying structure that links affect, memory, simulation, and identity across time. Unlike models that treat conscious content as momentary or modular, TFL positions inner experience as a dynamic negotiation between emotionally weighted memory and forward-looking simulation—both of which are constantly updated through recursive integration.

This framework enables a principled explanation of persistent thoughts, spontaneous behaviors, delayed motivation, and the internal stabilization of identity through simulated feedback. It reframes belief as a structural variable, simulation as a functional process, and affect as the modulator that binds cognition over time. These conceptual shifts extend beyond consciousness science, offering structured insights applicable to therapy, AI modeling, and future research on internal narrative coherence and volitional behavior.

By embedding loop logic at the core of perception, action, and memory, TFL advances a recursive paradigm in which selfhood is not a fixed trait, but a computational echo refined across experience. As this model evolves, it is intended to serve as a cognitive substrate upon which broader frameworks—neural, psychological, philosophical, and technological—can be reliably scaffolded.

Appendix A: Pseudo-Formal Loop Model and Observational Coding Structure

A.1 Core Variables and Definitions

Symbol	**Definition**
Input(t)	Present-moment sensory input at time t
Minfo(t)	Memory content retrieved via hippocampal activation at time t
E(t)	Affective-autonomic state at time t (valence + intensity)

Symbol	Definition
Sim(t)	Predictive simulation derived from Input(t), Minfo(t), and E(t)
F(t)	Fully integrated internal representation of the present loop cycle

Integration Function:

F(t) = Integration[Input(t), Minfo(t), Sim(t), E(t)]

Where Integration refers to recursive synthesis of perception, memory, and affective salience, mediated by hippocampal–prefrontal circuits.

A.2 Loop Stability and Resolution Conditions

Loop Continuation Criteria:

- E(t) remains above threshold
- Sim(t) is unresolved or re-triggered
- Minfo(t) retrieval reinforces congruent simulation

Loop Resolution Criteria:

- Simulation is behaviorally enacted
- Simulation is externally observed and affectively matched
- Affective intensity E(t) drops below threshold
- Cognitive reinterpretation invalidates or deactivates the simulation

A.3 Observational Coding Framework

Field	Description
Initial Encoding	Simulation or belief encoded with affective salience
Delay Duration	Time between encoding and simulation reentry or behavioral execution
Reentry Trigger	Internal thought, environmental cue, or emotional readiness
Resolution Type	Action, passive observation, or internal discharge
Testable Hypothesis	Derived prediction based on simulation-affect-feedback dynamics

This framework supports future behavioral, phenomenological, and computational tracking of loop behavior across real-world and experimental conditions.

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