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Autobiographical memory characteristics and self construal in 18 year old Norwegians and Slovaks



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Introduction

- Studies of autobiographical memory characteristics and their concurrence with a particular type of self-construal have shown significant differences across cultures. For example, Wang (2006) found earlier first memories and higher indication of autonomy in their content for Euro-Americans than for Taiwanese.
- Notably, in this study, she used several cue words and also found an effect of cue across samples. This can be interpreted as sign of contextual flexibility of memory characteristics irrespective of culture.
- However, most of this research has concentrated on first memories only, and focused on showing their differences between two prototypical cultural settings, American and East-Asian. We know less of Europeans (but see Santamaria et al, 2010) and the influence of context.

Aim & means

As part of a European extension project the present research looked for contextual stability or flexibility in young Europeans' autobiographical memory characteristics, by comparing memories from three significant areas of life - family, school and friends.

Hypotheses

- Family memories will be oldest and friend memories most recent, corresponding to a developmental trajectory where these three settings shift in importance for self definition.
- Setting will also be related to memories' content, with autonomous memories being more often from school, and others being mentioned more in memories friends and family settings.

Participants

Study 1: 22 Norwegians ($M = 17.9$ years)

Study 2: 40 Slovaks ($M = 18.2$ years)

Both studies balanced for gender and order of setting cue

Method

- Questionnaire asking to recall memories from three settings (family, school, friends/school, family, friends), at least 1 year old and of a special meaning to the participant
- Participants also reported their age at the time of the events and gave a rating of how often they have thought or talked about memories from this setting in general and the particular memory they just recalled (on a scale from 1 = never before to 7 = very often)
- Analysis of memory age, rehearsal, and relatedness/autonomous orientation by setting.
- Relatedness/autonomy codings used an adapted version of these codings in Wang (2001)

Independent variable: Setting cue (family, school or friendship)

Dependent variables:

- Age = age at the time of events (reported)
- Previous rehearsal of the retrieved memory (rated 0=never before to 7=very often)
- Tendency to rehearse from setting in question (rated 0=never before to 7=very often)
- Other-self ratio = number of references to others (+1) / number of references to self (+ 1)
- Autonomy count = number of expressions of person's autonomy, e.g. expression of own needs and desires, evaluations and opinions, etc.

Results

Study 1, Norway

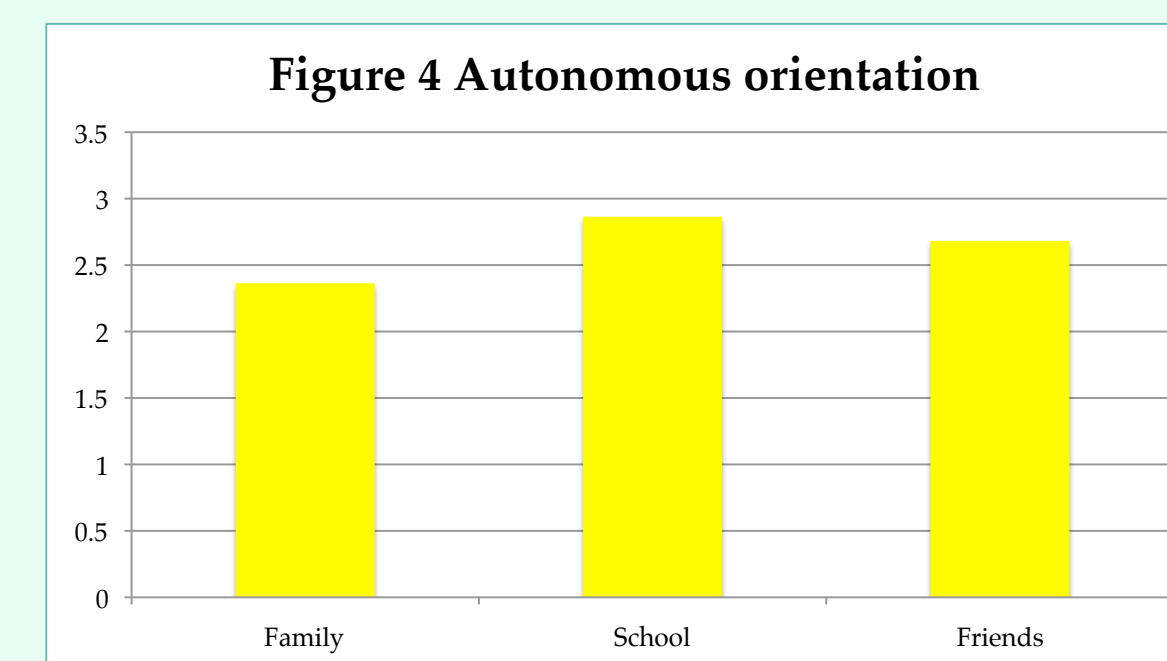
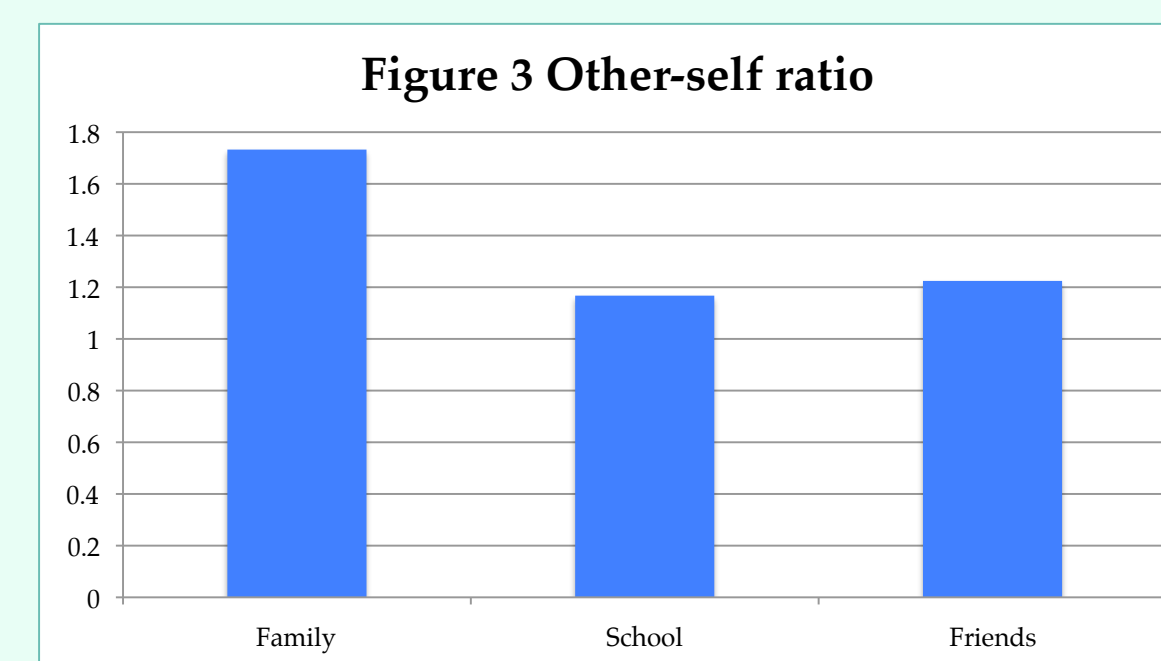
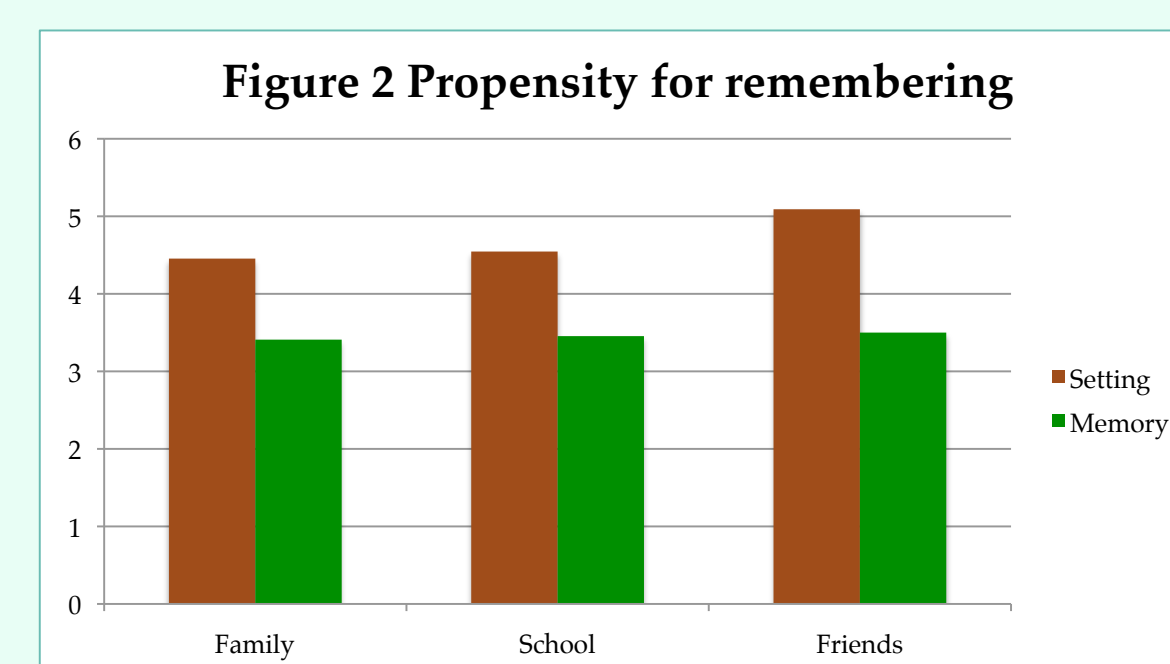
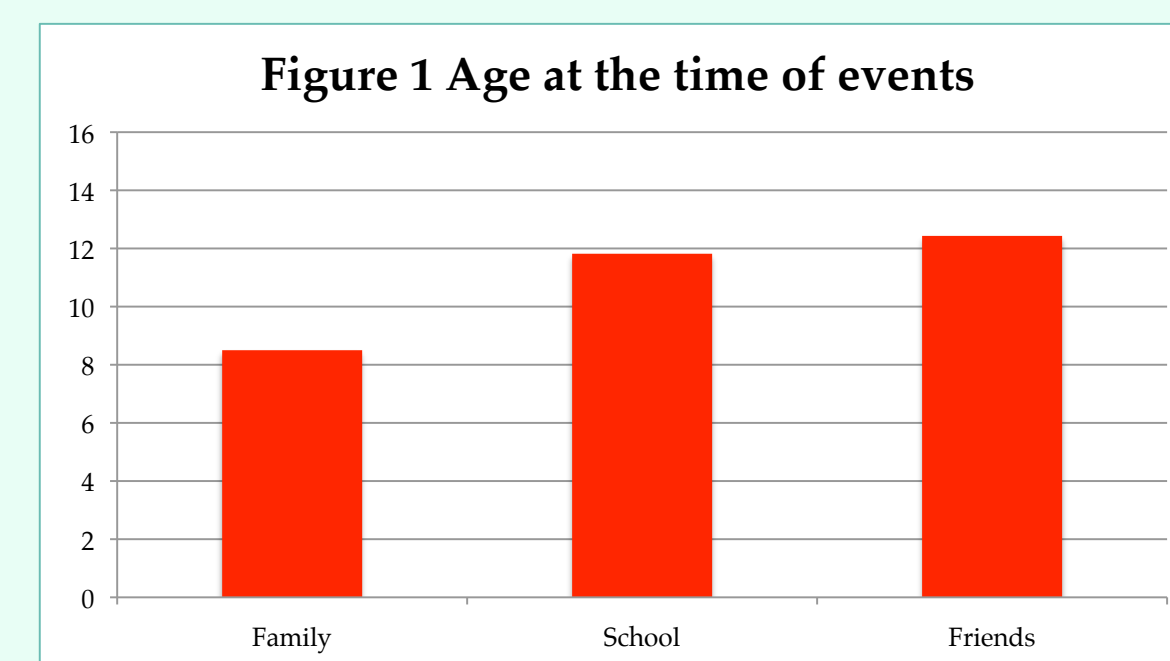


Table 1	Family		School		Friends		ANOVA	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	F	p <
Age at event	8.50	3.44	11.82	2.81	12.43	3.33	13.40	.001
Setting rehearsal	4.45	1.44	4.55	1.60	5.09	1.54	0.04	ns
Memory rehearsal	3.41	1.53	3.45	1.63	3.50	1.50	2.60	ns
Other-self ratio	1.73	1.47	1.17	0.51	1.22	0.64	2.27 ^{H-F}	ns
Autonomy count	2.36	2.13	2.86	1.39	2.68	2.12	0.64	ns

- Hypothesis A was supported: Family memories were from a significantly earlier age than school memories ($t = 3.648$, $df = 21$, $p < .01$), and also than friend memories ($t = 4.878$, $df = 21$, $p < .01$).
- We also found a trend in agreement with Hypothesis B – other-self ratio of family memories seemed the highest, followed by friend and school memories. Similarly, autonomous orientation of school memories seemed the highest, followed by friend and family memories. However, none of these results reached statistical significance.
- In both ratings, the propensity to remember seemed the highest for friend memories, followed by school and family memories. Again, no significant effect was found.

Study 2, Slovakia

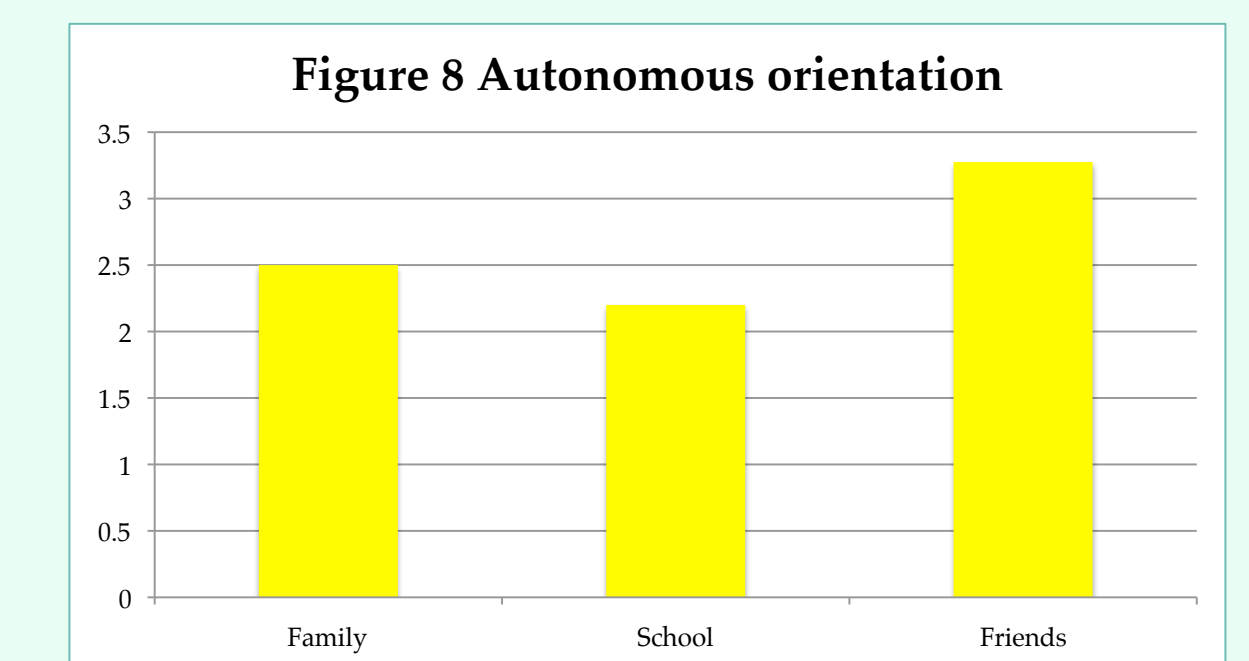
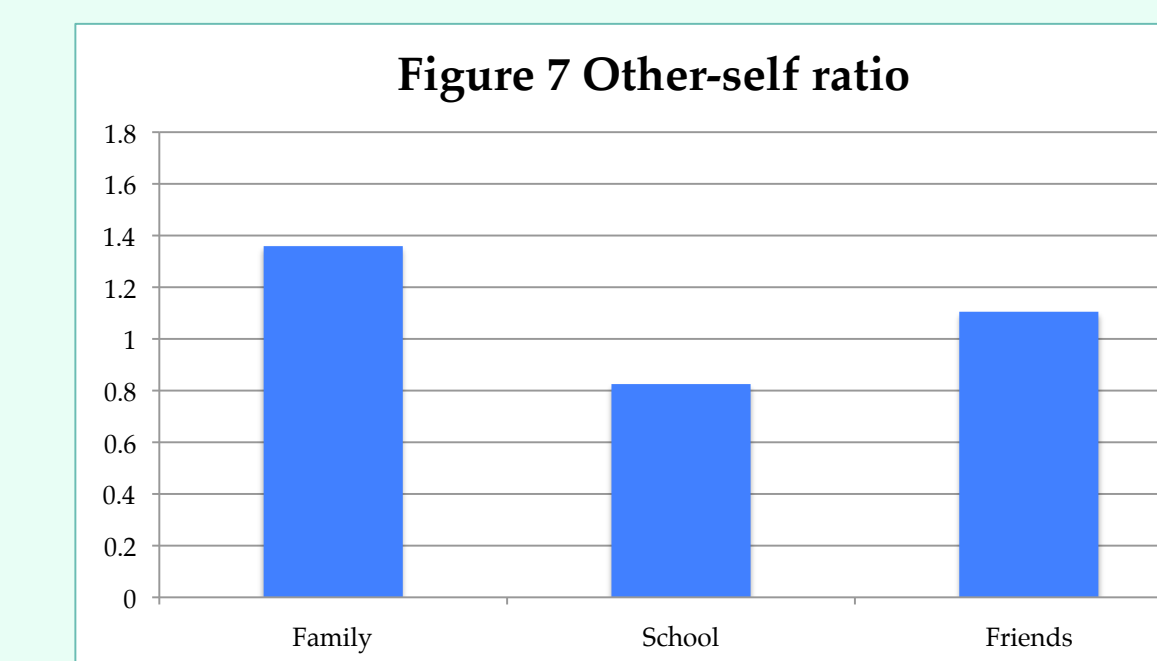
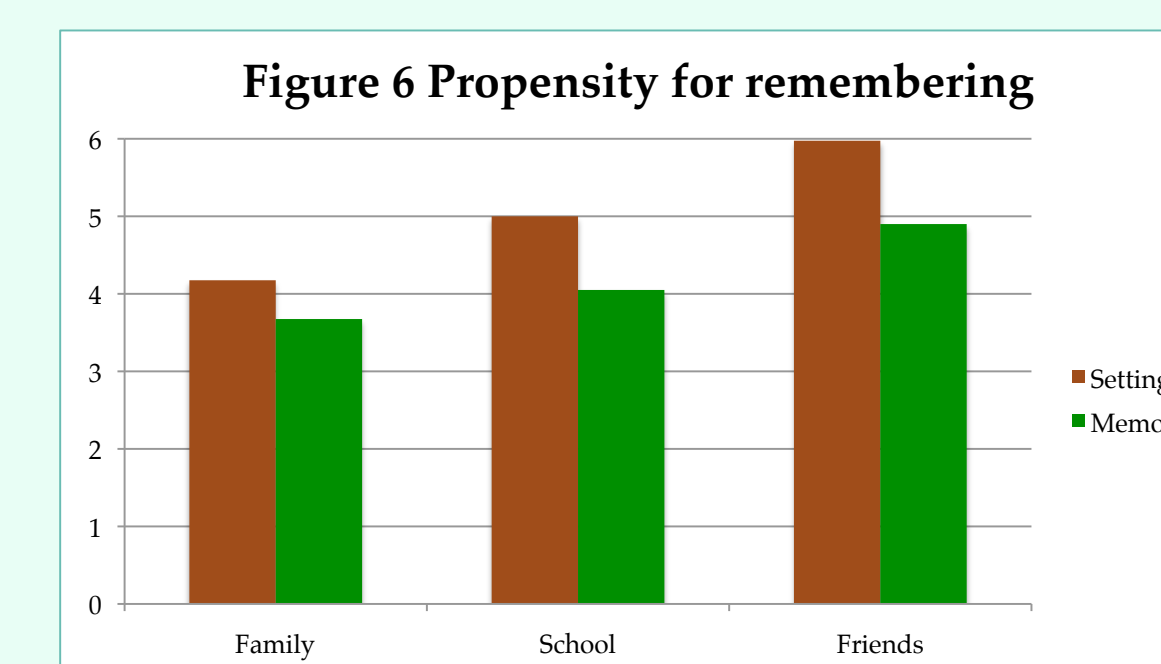
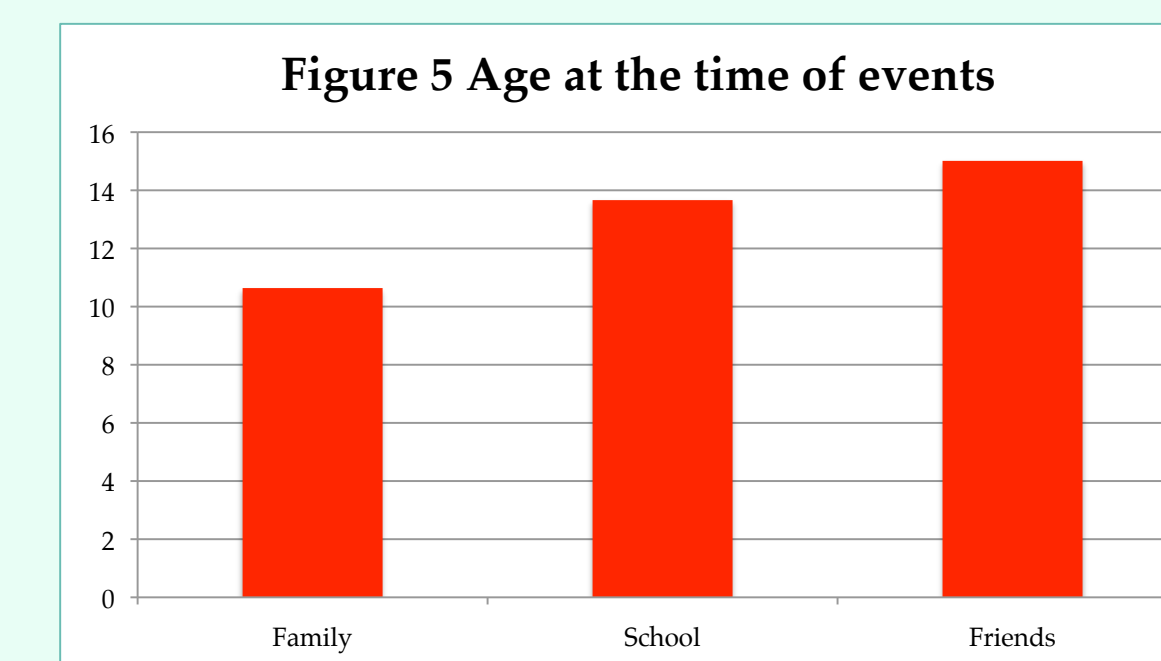


Table 2	Family		School		Friends		ANOVA	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	F	p <
Age at event	10.64	4.44	13.66	3.14	15.01	3.12	18.79	.001
Setting rehearsal	4.18	1.78	5.00	1.66	5.98	1.37	16.70	.001
Memory rehearsal	3.41	1.53	3.45	1.63	3.50	1.50	3.90	.025
Other-self ratio	1.36	1.13	0.83	0.49	1.11	0.38	5.57 ^{H-F}	.025
Autonomy count	2.50	2.67	2.20	1.84	3.28	2.39	2.64	ns

- Hypothesis A was again supported: Family memories were older than school ($t = 3.71$, $df = 39$, $p < .01$) and friend memories ($t = 5.69$, $df = 39$, $p < .01$), and also school memories were older than friend memories ($t = 2.29$, $df = 35$, $p < .05$).
- Hypothesis B was partially supported: Other-self ratio was higher in friends and family than school memories ($t = 3.06$, $df = 39$, $p < .01$ and $t = 2.94$, $df = 39$, $p < .01$, respectively). Autonomy seemed lowest in school memories, contrary to expectations; but no significant effect was found.
- Replicating the trend in Study 1, rehearsal ratings for both memories and settings were highest for friend and lowest for family. For setting, the difference was significant between all three (family-school $t = 2.31$, $df = 39$, $p < .05$; school-friend $t = 3.59$, $df = 39$, $p < .01$), and for memory between family and friend ($t = 2.70$, $df = 39$, $p < .05$) but not between school and either.

Discussion

Contextual flexibility in autobiographical memory characteristics were found in Northern (Norway) as well as Eastern (Slovakia) Europeans. When asked for memories from three ongoing settings of their lives, (A) family memories were oldest, school memories of intermediate age and friend memories most recent, thus reflecting a developmental trajectory where the three settings have shifted in importance. (B) There was also an effect of setting on memory content. Although the predicted direction of content variation was only met in one of the two content variables and only reached statistical significance in the biggest sample (Slovakia), the general pattern suggests contextual flexibility in content as well as age distribution of memories of three significant concurrent life settings. Rehearsal ratings lend further support to the idea that friendship is the most important setting for 18 year olds, although it should be noted that friend memories would be recalled most easily simply because they were most recent, cf. the macrostructure of autobiographical memories (Conway & Rubin, 1993).

Conclusion

Results show that characteristics of European's memories are contextually flexible, and suggest that friendship is more pervasive in 18 year olds' self construal than are family and school.

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