The Importance of Friends in Autobiographical Memory

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The importance of friends in autobiographical memory

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Introduction

Autobiographical memory – memories of significant personal experiences from an individual’s life (Wang & Conway, 2004) – and self-construal – constellation of thoughts, feelings, and actions concerning one’s relationship to others and the self as distinct from others (Singelis, 1994) – are considered to be mutually interrelated.

Many cross-cultural studies investigate this relationship, but they tend to focus on recall of earliest childhood memories.

Therefore, family is typically the most prominent setting of these memories, as family’s role for individual’s self-construal is the most important in this period.

But the roles of other people for individual’s self-construal might change during development – such as in adolescence, where friends and school could become at least as influential as family.

Based on the mutual interrelatedness of autobiographical memory and self-construal, the importance of the family, school and friendship settings for adolescent’s self-construal should then be reflected in this adolescent’s autobiographical memories.

Thus, rather than asking for earliest childhood memories (selection by time), we instead ask for the most meaningful memories (selection by importance) to elicit memories that are the most relevant to the adolescent’s current self.

Pilot results and suggested model

In a pilot study, we asked 22 Norwegian adolescents (M = 17.95) to recall three meaningful memories about their family, school and friends.

We found:

1. Adolescents’ meaningful friendship memories were most recent and family memories oldest.
2. When asked to rate how often they have thought or talked about the specific (just recalled) memories and about family, school and friendship memories in general, the friendship memories were the most frequently rehearsed (in both cases) and family memories the least.
3. When coding the adolescents’ recalled memories for the amount of relatedness – based on how many times they refer to other people and how many times they refer to themselves – the family memories included the highest amount of relatedness, the school memory the lowest, with friendship memories falling in between.

A similar pattern was found in the Slovak sample reported in Antalíková, Gulbransden, Hansen, de la Mata, & Santamaría (2011) with the following model suggested (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1: Settings’ contributions to self-construal. The developmental trajectory of settings’ shifting dominance in adolescents’ life, as reflected in the recency and relatedness of their meaningful memories.](image)

Results Slovaks vs. Danes

![Figure 2: Age at event (in years).](image)

![Figure 3a: Setting rehearsal.](image)

![Figure 3b: Memory rehearsal.](image)

![Figure 4: Other-self ratio.](image)

Discussion

The suggested model (Figure 1) fits the meaningful memories from Danes and Slovaks in terms of memories’ age distribution (family oldest, friend most recent) and amount of relatedness (family highest, school lowest).

However, rehearsal patterns differed. Younger Danes think or talk more about family than young Slovaks.

One could speculate that Slovak adolescents “leave” the family setting behind faster than Danish adolescents and that family memories are therefore better representations of “who they were”, rather than “who they are now”. This assumption needs to be investigated in further research.

References


Method

Similar to pilot study:

- Questionnaire asking to recall memories from three settings, which should be at least 1 year old and of a special meaning to the participant.
- The settings were presented in two alternative sequences in order to test for sequence effect – there was none.
- Participants also reported their age at the time of these events and gave a rating of how often they have thought or talked about the particular memory they have just recalled and about memories from this setting in general (on a scale from 1 = never before to 7 = very often).
- Memories were coded for relatedness (after Wang & Conway, 2004).

Figure 1: Settings’ contributions to self-construal. The developmental trajectory of settings’ shifting dominance in adolescents’ life, as reflected in the recency and relatedness of their meaningful memories.