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Self-development

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Self-development: A trajectory from family over school to friends?



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Introduction

- From a cultural-historical point of view, **school** is a fundamental setting for appropriation of cultural tools and these transform the way the subject perceives the world (Vygotsky, 1986)
- A considerable volume of research has shown the relationship between formal education and processes of memory, categorization, reasoning and problem solving (e.g., Luria, 1976)
- Formal education may similarly change the notion of **self**, e.g., away from defining oneself contextually in terms of one's group of origin (ibid.) and towards the ideas of the independent citizen that is promoted by Modernity (Olson, 1994), but more research is needed in this area
- To investigate the issue, the Sevilla Laboratory of Human Activity integrates research on self from cross-cultural psychology (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991), **autobiographical memory** (e.g., Wang & Conway, 2004) and narrative (e.g., Smorti, 2004)
- For example, de la Mata et al. (in press) compared Mexican groups with different levels of formal education and found more indications of relatedness in the self-memories of participants with little education, whereas participants with more education were more prone to recall themselves in ways associated with an independent notion of self
- The present study adds a within-subject analysis (Antalíková, Gulbrandsen, Hansen, de la Mata Benítez, & Santamaría, in press) to support the assumption that it is indeed education that enhances independent notions of self and not vice versa. For context, models of self from cross-cultural psychology and autobiographical memory are summarized before the results.

Self-construal describes the culturally shaped view on self, including the degree of inclusion of other people in one's self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991)

For example, one can view oneself rather independent from others or rather strongly related to others

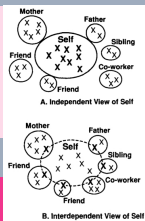


Figure 1. Two types of self-construal (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p. 226)

Autobiographical memory encompasses memories of significant personal experiences from an individual's life (Wang & Conway, 2004)

Autobiographical memory and self-construal are considered to be mutually interrelated – self modulates possibly meaningful autobiographical memories, which in turn reinforce the integrity and continuity of self

Numerous studies have shown that individuals with different self-construals (Figure 1) recall different type of autobiographical memories (either focusing more on oneself or more on other people)

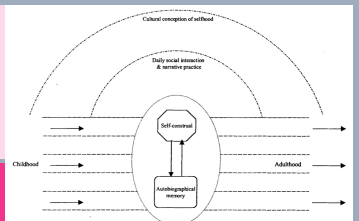


Figure 2. The interactive relation between autobiographical memory and the self across the life course (Wang, 2001, p. 228)

Hypotheses and suggested model

Based on the mutual interrelatedness of autobiographical memory and self-construal, and the assumption of school promoting an independent self, we asked adolescents to recall meaningful memories about their family, school and friendship, expecting the following:

- Looking at independence and relatedness of self, school memories will display the highest autonomy, while family and friendship memories will point to higher independence;
- Looking at the time perspective of adolescent self-development, family memories will be recalled from the earliest age followed by school and friendship memories, mirroring our participants' developmental trajectory.

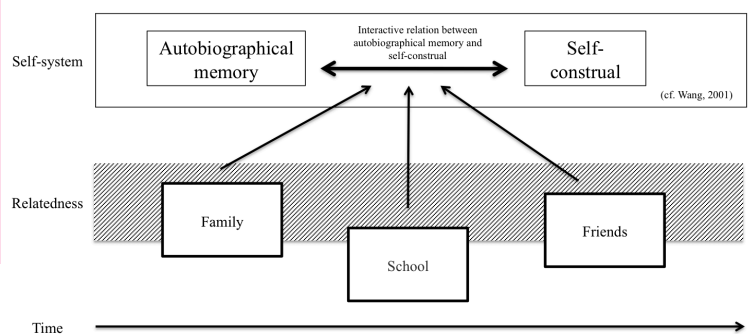
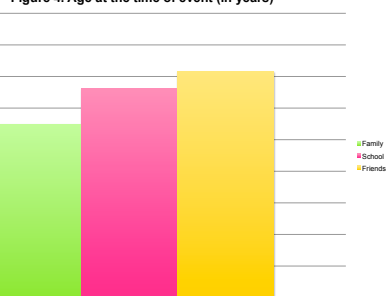


Figure 3. Settings' contributions to self-construal: The developmental trajectory of settings' shifting dominance in adolescents' life, as reflected in the recency and relatedness of their meaningful memories (Antalíková et al., in press)

Results

- Participants: 22 Norwegian ($M = 17.95$), 40 Slovak ($M = 18.2$) and 52 Danish adolescents ($M = 19.1$) – together a sample of 114 adolescents ($M = 18.56$), balanced for gender
- Method: questionnaire in participants' mother tongues asking them to recall memories about their family, school, and friends, which should be at least 1 year old and of a special meaning to them
- Variables: participant's *age* at the time of recalled events (self-reported); *other-self ratio* (number of references to other people divided by number of references to oneself) (Wang & Conway, 2004)

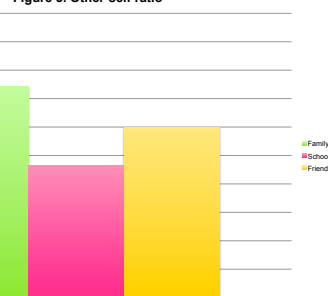
Figure 4. Age at the time of event (in years)



Friedman's test showed a significant main effect of setting on the age at the time of event, $\chi^2(2, N = 111) = 36.57, p < .001$

Participants recalled family memories that were from a significantly earlier age than school ($Z = -4.72, p < .0005$, one-tailed) and friend memories ($Z = -6.05, p < .0005$, one-tailed), and their school memories were also from a significantly earlier age than friend memories ($Z = -3.19, p < .0005$, one-tailed)

Figure 5. Other-self ratio



Friedman's test showed a significant main effect of setting on the other-self ratio, $\chi^2(2, N = 114) = 31.95, p < .001$

Participants recalled family memories that included significantly more indicators of relatedness than school ($Z = -5.67, p < .0005$, one-tailed) and friend memories ($Z = -2.47, p = .007$, one-tailed), and their school memories also included more indicators of relatedness than friend memories ($Z = -4.16, p < .0005$, one-tailed)

"In the 6th grade, I wrote a some kind of essay or a story in the Danish classes. My Danish teacher told me that I should try to get it published, that she has thought several times that I had a talent for writing."

School memory of a 20-year-old Danish girl (age at the event: 12 years)

"The best memory is the birthday party with my friends. I felt extraordinary, because for the first time, people that I like in my life the most and that I value highly were together. I got beautiful presents; everybody knew me well and therefore knew what I wanted. We had fun the whole night and I felt happy that I have such friends that were there."

Friendship memory of a 18-year-old Slovak girl (age at the event: 17 years)

Discussion

- Both of our hypotheses were supported:

 - Participants did recall family memories from the earliest age, followed by school and friendship memories, following a developmental trajectory where the three settings shift in importance; and
 - In school memories, participants did refer more to themselves than to other people, as opposed to family and friendship memories, indicating that when thinking and talking about school, they were thinking more independently of themselves than in the other social settings.

This suggests that not only formal education can change the notion of one's self towards higher independence, but also that the setting of school itself (and the remembering thereof) activates this independence within one's self accordingly, which is displayed in one's autobiographical memories

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