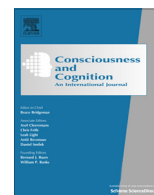




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Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Consciousness and Cognition

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/concog

Indirect cueing elicits distinct types of autobiographical event representations [☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 22 March 2013

Available online 31 October 2013

Keywords:

Memory

Event

Autobiographical belief

Cueing

Nonbelieved memory

ABSTRACT

Studies that distinguish among believed memories, believed-not-remembered events (e.g., family stories), and nonbelieved memories (i.e., memories no longer believed to have occurred) typically rely on experimenter provided or overtly elicited events. These methods may mis-estimate the frequency and nature of such events in everyday memory. Three studies examined whether such events would be elicited via indirect cueing. Participants recalled and rated events on autobiographical belief, recollection, and other characteristics associated with remembering. All three event types resulted, but with a low rate of nonbelieved memories. Believed and nonbelieved memories received similar perceptual and re-experiencing ratings, and both exceeded believed-not-remembered events. Lifespan cueing found nonbelieved memories to be most frequent in middle childhood (ages 6–11). Cueing for “events” vs. “memories” revealed that “memory” cues lead to retrieval of a more homogeneous set of events and differences when predicting autobiographical belief and recollection. These studies support the distinction between autobiographical belief and recollection for autobiographical events.

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1. Introduction

Discussions of autobiographical memory frequently emphasize the recollective aspects of remembering. For example, autobiographical memory is frequently studied by asking (or cueing) people to provide ‘memories’. Research has identified features of memories that are consistently elicited in response to such queries. Autobiographical events tend to be labeled as memories when event representations are accompanied by vivid mental simulation (perceptual vividness, spatial–temporal details) and a sense of re-experiencing the past (Addis, Pan, Vu, Laiser, & Schacter, 2009). In other terms, recollection is a metacognitive appraisal that is made at the time of remembering (Johnson, Raye, Mitchell, & Ankudowich, 2011; Rubin, 2006). Because researchers typically ask for memories, it is perhaps not surprising that participants tend to report vivid episodic events.

But recollection is not the only metacognitive appraisal present when remembering the past. A variety of other appraisals are also made of autobiographical events. For example: Does the event have particular significance to one’s life story? How recently or how frequently has this event been recalled? How accurate are the various details within the event in representing the prior experience? One central non-recollective judgment that is typically present when vivid autobiographical memories are recalled is the belief that the event genuinely occurred in the past. This is termed *autobiographical belief* (or *belief in*

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occurrence), and is defined as the subjective assignment of truth-value to the proposition that the event occurred to the self (Mazzoni, Scoboria, & Harvey, 2010; Scoboria, Mazzoni, Kirsch, & Relyea, 2004).

In the current studies, we examined the methods that are used to elicit autobiographical event representations, and the conclusions that are made about the types of event representations that result. This topic is timely because recent research has shown that recollection and autobiographical belief are substantially independent. In the laboratory, researchers have reliably produced memories for which autobiographical belief exceeds the degree of recollection for the event (i.e., believed-not-remembered events; Hart & Schooler, 2006; Mazzoni, Loftus, Seitz, & Lynn, 1999; Scoboria, Lynn, Hessen, & Fisco, 2007). Such events also occur frequently outside the laboratory. A parent may describe an event for which their child has little recollection, but which he/she comes to believe occurred. Such memories are not infrequent; for example, when rating childhood events, autobiographical belief ratings exceed recollection ratings in nearly half of cases (Scoboria et al., 2004). Confabulatory delusions in some individuals with schizophrenia can also reflect instances where autobiographical belief is high even when recollection is low (Baddeley, Thornton, Chua, & McKenna, 1995). There are also naturally occurring instances in which vivid recollection exists without belief that the event occurred, which are termed “nonbelieved memories” (Mazzoni et al., 2010). In this case the person has a ‘memory’ for the event – participants rate recollective features as being as strong as their past believed memories. At the same time, they report lacking belief that the event represents a true occurrence from their past.

Recent work has drawn on believed-not-remembered events and nonbelieved memories to document a strong and reliable distinction in simple factor structure of the recollection and autobiographical belief constructs, and demonstrated a double dissociation in the predictors of each (Scoboria et al., *in press*). This work shows that characteristics of the memory image (e.g., perceptual features and the sense of re-experiencing) predict recollection but not autobiographical belief, whereas event plausibility strongly predicts autobiographical belief but weakly predicts recollection. This work shows that by focussing on believed memories in autobiographical memory research, we cannot effectively demonstrate the distinction between autobiographical belief and recollection. This is because both are strongly present for such events, leading to an artificial appearance of high correspondence. Furthermore, with this bias toward specific types of autobiographical event representations, the true population and availability of other distinct types of event representations are likely underestimated.

In order to expand upon the range of event representations examined, some studies have queried specific classes of memories or sought to contrast different types of representations. In addition to the word-cue technique, Galton also devised the “breakfast technique” which asked participants to recall the appearance of that morning’s breakfast table, “directing subjects to particular episodes in their lives” (Brewer, 1986, p. 36). In the false memory literature, researchers typically suggest the same false childhood or false laboratory-based events to participants within studies (Hessen-Kayfitz & Scoboria, 2012; Ost, 2013). Other studies have further demonstrated via this approach that nonbelieved memories can be created in the lab (Clark, Nash, Fincham, & Mazzoni, 2012; Otgaar, Scoboria, & Smeets, 2013). Investigators have also drawn participants’ attention to metacognitive judgments about events and/or the phenomenological properties of the memories compared to non-memorial representations. Johnson, Foley, Suengas, and Raye (1988) asked participants to contrast believed autobiographical memories with newly imagined events (see also Arbutnott, Geelen, & Kealy, 2002; Kealy, Kuiper, & Klein, 2006). Crawley and Eacott (2006) asked individuals to retrieve and rate personal memories in contrast to recall of events that occurred to other people. Specific to the distinction between autobiographical belief and recollection, Mazzoni et al. (2010) used an event contrast approach when asking their participants to select and rate age-matched nonbelieved memories, believed memories, and believed-not-remembered events.

There are potential problems associated with directly asking participants to recall events with specific mnemonic characteristics or metacognitive features. Doing so draws attention to properties that may otherwise not be salient to participants when remembering events. The event comparison approach assumes independence of the categories, but awareness of the categories of interest may bias individuals to compare the events when making ratings, whereas ratings may have varied to a different degree if events were elicited in isolation and if participants were not aware of the features in which the researcher is interested. Most troubling, directly querying categories may produce experimental demands to produce particular types of event descriptions, even if representations of the type(s) requested do not occur outside of the laboratory. The false memory approach, and by extension the studies of nonbelieved memories that build upon it, also have the potential limitations that the events used are selected by researchers, are therefore likely less personally significant than genuine events, and the event representations are recently constructed.

What such studies cannot achieve is an understanding of the nature and frequency of nonbelieved memories and believed-not-remembered events as they exist in everyday autobiographical memory. What is needed is a method which encourages the reporting of different types of autobiographical event representations, but without asking for the categories directly (thereby avoiding biases in event selection). Such an approach should sample various types of representations and examine autobiographical events that are personally relevant.

One goal of the current research was to develop methods to indirectly cue events by which greater variability in autobiographical belief and recollection ratings could emerge. Without artificially drawing participants’ attention to these constructs, we hoped to elicit believed memories, believed-not-remembered events, and nonbelieved memories. Furthermore, should such events be elicited, we planned to examine the phenomenology associated with each, the relationship between belief in occurrence and recollection for each, and how cueing techniques influence this relationship. We

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