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## Social Contagion of Autobiographical Memories

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We modified the social contagion of memory paradigm to track whether details mentioned during social interaction are transmitted to later individual recall for personal, autobiographical memories. Participants recalled four autobiographical events. A week later, participants described these events to a confederate, who described scripted “memories.” They then summarised each other’s recall. When summarising participants’ memories, confederates inserted two specific new details. Finally, participants recalled the events individually. We scored final individual recall for suggested contagion (new details inserted by confederates) and unsuggested contagion (new details consistent with confederates’ scripted memories but not suggested). We found social contagion for autobiographical memories: at final recall, 30% of participants recalled at least one suggested detail. Notably, at final recall, 90% of participants recalled at least one unsuggested detail from confederates’ scripted memories. Thus, social interaction, even if fairly minimal, can result in the transmission of specific details into memory for personal, autobiographical events.

**General Audience Summary**

In social contagion experiments, participants remember alongside a *confederate* who behaves like a participant but actually is working for the experimenter. They view slides depicting household scenes (e.g., kitchen). Next, they take turns to recall items from the scenes, during which the confederate mentions incorrect items. Later, when participants recall alone they sometimes remember the incorrect items as if they had really seen them. In our study, we tested whether these findings extend beyond simple material learned in the experiment to personal memories from participants’ lives: do they pick up and incorporate details mentioned by other people? In our study, people recalled four personal events like a birthday party. A week later, they described these events to a confederate, who in turn described scripted memories. The participant and the confederate then summarised each other’s recall, but when the confederate summarised the participant’s memories, they inserted two new details. Later, when participants remembered alone, we found social contagion for autobiographical memories: within their memories of the events, 30% of participants recalled at least one of the inserted details, and 90% recalled details from the confederate’s scripted memory. This research shows how even fairly superficial social interactions can influence what we remember.

**Keywords:** Social contagion, Autobiographical memory, Social influence, Social memory

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We often remember in groups (Barnier, Sutton, Harris, & Wilson, 2008) to fulfill social goals (Alea & Bluck, 2003; Harris, Keil, Sutton, Barnier, & McIlwain, 2011; Harris, Rasmussen, & Berntsen, 2014) and joint reminiscing with intimate partners can facilitate memory (Barnier et al., 2014; Harris et al., 2011; Harris, Barnier, Sutton, Keil, & Dixon, 2017; Harris, Barnier, Sutton, & Keil, 2014; Sutton, Harris, Keil, & Barnier, 2010). In many settings precise accuracy is not the primary goal, and details recalled about an event during conversational reminiscing are likely to vary between recall occasions, reflecting memory's dynamic, goal-directed, and context-specific nature (Bavelas, Coates, & Johnson, 2000; Blank, 2009; Pasupathi, 2001; Pasupathi & Hoyt, 2010).

Much experimental research on social remembering comes from the *false memory* tradition, focusing on forensic settings in which concerns about the reliability of memory are central (e.g., Loftus, 2005; Wright, Memon, Skagerberg, & Gabbert, 2009). The *social contagion of memory* paradigm (Meade & Roediger, 2002; Roediger, Meade, & Bergman, 2001) is one such method. In the original social contagion methodology, participants studied and recalled household scenes with a confederate who was ostensibly a fellow participant. During joint recall, the confederate introduced several incorrect items. On a final individual test, some participants falsely recalled these incorrect items suggested by the confederate, even when accuracy was emphasised (Roediger et al., 2001) or warnings were provided (Meade & Roediger, 2002). Participants also recalled additional correct items mentioned by the confederate, likely due to re-exposure (see also Blumen & Rajaram, 2008). Thus, remembering with another person can benefit memory by cuing accurate recall (when correct) but can cost memory by introducing errors (when incorrect; Rush & Clark, 2013; see also Harris, Paterson, & Kemp, 2008; Wright, Self, & Justice, 2000).

Social contagion effects are established for relatively mundane material learned within the experiment. However, it is unknown whether similar social influences operate on people's personal, autobiographical memories, of which they are the owner and author. In the current study, we developed an autobiographical version of the social contagion paradigm, tracking whether details introduced by a confederate were incorporated into participants' individual recall. False memory research suggests that social influences can lead people to recall autobiographical events that did not happen. Such research often involves "implanting" false memories from childhood (Loftus, 1997), and has used elaborate suggestions, like doctored photos (e.g., Wade, Garry, Don Read, & Lindsay, 2002), intermingling false events with true events obtained from parents (e.g., Loftus & Pickrell, 1995), or detailed imagination procedures (e.g., Mazzoni & Memon, 2003). In the social contagion paradigm, the suggestions are minimal and target details from within a larger scene. It is possible that—for autobiographical memories—social influences only have an impact after complex suggestions targeting distant events such as childhood memories. Moreover, research within the social contagion paradigm has suggested that both emotional information (Brown & Schaefer, 2010; Kensinger, Choi, Murray, & Rajaram, 2016) and confidently recalled information (Horry, Palmer, Sexton,

& Brewer, 2012) are less susceptible to contagion. Thus, it is possible that the relatively minor suggestions used in the social contagion paradigm do not extend to personal, emotional, relatively recent autobiographical memories.

However, within a range of other research traditions—in which social influences on autobiographical memory have been examined in the context of naturalistic conversations rather than elaborate suggestions—research suggests that autobiographical memories can be influenced and shaped by simple conversations (Edwards & Middleton, 1986; Pasupathi, 2001). Harris, Barnier, Sutton, and Keil (2010) found that people's memories for emotion and shock upon hearing of the death of Australian celebrity Steve Irwin were altered by an open-ended conversation with their peers, even one month later. This study involved no direct suggestion or "contagion," but suggestions about how it was appropriate to react emerged naturally in conversation. Stone, Barnier, Sutton, and Hirst (2013) extended the socially-shared retrieval induced forgetting paradigm beyond word list stimuli to demonstrate that conversations induce forgetting of participant's autobiographical memories (see also Coman, Manier, & Hirst, 2009). These findings suggest that simple conversations can shape autobiographical memory for details, but so far, there is little research tracking the fate of specific details mentioned during conversation into later individual recall.

In the current study, we used an adapted version of the social contagion paradigm to study whether we might see social transmission (contagion) of specific details mentioned by a confederate for autobiographical events. First, participants described four events in detail to the experimenter (pre-contagion). Next, participants took turns with a confederate to describe their memories to the experimenter and then to summarise the other person's memory: for two of the events, the confederate inserted a new detail into their summary of the participant's memory (contagion). Our methodology resulted in two potential sources of social influence: (a) suggested contagion: the directly suggested, specific items that the confederate inserted; and (b) unsuggested contagion: details from the confederate's scripted "memory" of the same kind of event, where there was no direct suggestion that the participant's memory should be similar. We scored participants' final individual recall (post-contagion) for the presence of suggested and unsuggested contagion, as well as for details added or omitted from pre-contagion to post-contagion, to index changes across recall occasions.

We also tested the uptake of different kinds of contagion based on a motivational model of autobiographical memory: specifically, we compared whether positive or negative contagion items were more likely to be incorporated into participants' memories. Previous research has suggested that emotional valence does not influence memory conformity for non-personal stimuli (Wright, Busnello, Buratto, & Stein, 2012). However, given the self-enhancing, positively biased nature of autobiographical memory (e.g., Conway, Singer, & Tagini, 2004; D'Argembeau & Van der Linden, 2008; Demiray & Janssen, 2015; Walker, Skowronski, & Thompson, 2003), we expected that emotional valence may alter the influence of social contagion in our autobiographical version of the paradigm.

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