



Transition Theory: A Minimalist Perspective on the Organization of Autobiographical Memory[☆]



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Transition Theory (T^2) assumes that the content and organization of *autobiographical memory* mirror the structure of experience and reflect the operation of basic associative processes. Thus, this approach rests on an environmental analysis that emphasizes repetition, co-occurrence, change, and distinctiveness. In this article, I first provide an overview of a research project, the *Living-in-History* project, that has provided the impetus for this theory. Next, I identify several basic autobiographical constructs – event components, event representations, lifetime periods, transitions – and define them within the T^2 framework. I conclude by arguing that: (a) the formation of lifetime period is driven by association and by repeated exposure to frequently encountered, co-occurring event components; (b) period boundaries are transitions that bring about large-scale synchronized changes to the set of regularly encountered event components; and (c) these claims hold for individual-level transitions (e.g., relocation) and collective ones (e.g., war).

General Audience Summary

Our lives are boring, or at least repetitive. Oddly enough, this basic fact has been ignored by researchers interested in autobiographical memory. In this article, I summarize a theory, *Transition Theory* (T^2), developed in response to this situation; I also review a project, the *Living-in-History* project, which motivated it. In brief, the *Living-in-History* project demonstrates that public events occasionally play an important role in how people think about their lives. However, this happens only where (and when) these events produce a fundamental and enduring change in the *fabric of daily life*. T^2 provides a psychologically tractable formulation for this metaphor. On this view, the “threads” that constitute the fabric of daily life correspond to mental representations that capture our knowledge of repeatedly encountered people, places, and things and recurring activities. During stable times, these representations are “woven” together by basic associative processes and come to form *lifetime periods* (i.e., “my college years,” “when I was living in New York,” etc.). These period representations are separated (delineated) by major life transitions. Transitions are events like relocation or the birth of a child which “change everything.” Follow along with the fabric metaphor, transitional events replace one set of threads (i.e., the frequently encountered, material features of everyday life) with another, and do so in a rapid, exhaustive, and synchronized manner. Thus, T^2 contends that autobiographical memory is structured by important life transitions and that major transitions play an important role in organizing memories, regardless of whether they are individual (e.g., immigration) or collective (e.g., war) in nature.

Keywords: Autobiographical memory, Collective memory, Transition theory, Hebbian learning

Our lives are boring, or at least repetitive (Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2004). For large stretches of time, we live in the same place, work the same job, socialize

with same people, and pursue the same interests. Within these stable periods, there is change: A friend may move, a favored restaurant close; we might take up a new hobby or become a

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regular at that new café that just open around corner. Or the dog might die. Changes like these alter things, but in minor ways; in general, though, we carry on pretty much as before. And then, there those changes that “change everything”: immigration from one country to another, unemployment, death of a spouse, birth of a child, debilitating illness, winning the lottery, etc. Changes like these which put an end to one way of life and usher in another are often, at first, unsettling and stressful (Hobson & Delunas, 2001; Holmes & Rahe, 1967). However, with the passage of time, the novelty wears off and life again becomes routine – boring, or at least repetitive. A new normal is established, a normal that differs in fundamental ways for the one that had existed before.

In this article, I present an approach to autobiographical memory, *Transition Theory* (T^2), that is grounded, in part, by these observations. The theory takes as its starting point the idea that the contents and organization of autobiographical memory mirror our experience. Thus, this approach rests on a simple analysis of the physical and social environment, one that emphasises repetitive nature of daily life, but that also highlights the mnemonic consequences of important life transitions. Of course, psychologists have long recognized that the structure of our environment both constrains and facilitates the ways that we perceive and act in the world (Brunswik, 1952; Gibson, 1950; Hammond, 1986; Neisser, 1976). However, with rare exceptions (e.g., Anderson & Schooler, 1991; Nairne & Pandeirada, 2010), this insight does not figure prominently in mainstream memory research. Odder still is the almost complete absence of an ecological perspective in the study of autobiographical memory, an absence that exists despite the intrinsic connection between this form of memory and the real-world experiences that engender it.¹

T^2 , then, can be seen as an attempt to establish a framework for understanding autobiographical memory that is based on a correspondence between experience and memory. However, it was also developed as a response to a set of findings produced by the *Living-in-History* project. In the next section, this project and these findings are briefly described. Then, I identify a set of basic constructs that characterize autobiographical memory – event components, event representations, lifetime periods, and transitions – and define them within the T^2 framework. I also argue that (a) the periodization of autobiographical memory is an emergent property, driven by association and repeated exposure to frequently encountered, co-occurring event components, and that (b) period boundaries should be understood as transitions that bring about a large-scale, synchronized change to the set of event components that one encounters on a daily basis.

The Living-in-History Project

At the outset, the aims of the *Living-in-History* project were: (a) to assess the impact of public events on autobiographical

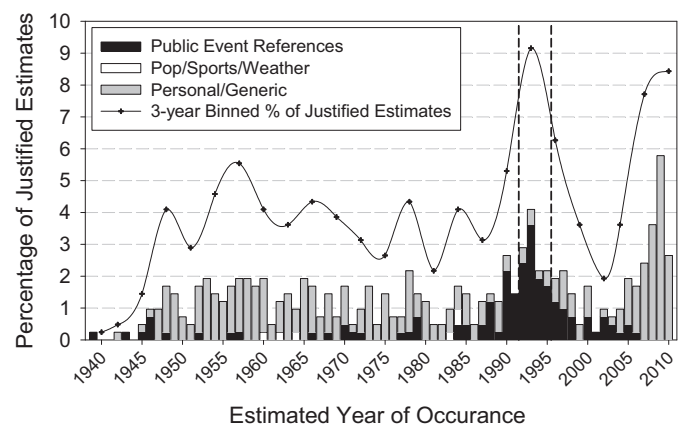


Figure 1. Temporal distribution of recalled event memories collected from a sample of older Bosnians (median age = 72) in 2010. The bars represent percent of responses as a function of protocol type and estimated year of occurrence. The splined curve represents the 3-year binned sum of the justified estimates and the vertical dashed lines indicate the boundaries of Bosnian Civil War.

memory; (b) to determine whether there are systematic group differences in the relationship between these two types of knowledge; and (c) to identify factors that are present when personal memory and historical memory become intertwined. My colleagues and I have used a two-stage procedure to pursue these questions. During Phase 1, participants are presented with a set of neutral cue words and are required to respond to each by recalling the memory of a specific cue-related autobiographical event. During Phase 2, participants receive their Phase-1 memories and are required to think aloud as they date each of them.

To date, this method has been used to collect protocols from some 30 samples, drawn from 16 countries. Dating protocols are of interest because they sometimes contain references to public events. We use the prevalence of such references to index the degree to which historically significant public events affect people's lives. (See Brown, Schweickart, & Svob, *in press*, for a detailed account of the dating method and our rationale for using it to study the organization of autobiographical memory.) When references to a specific public event or historical period are common in a sample, we say that we have observed the *Living-in-History* (LiH) Effect. And, we take this fact as evidence that the lives (and hence the memories) of people in the sampled population have been shaped by the historical events they have lived through.

Figure 1 provides a clear example of the LiH Effect. These data were collected in 2010 from a group of 25 older Bosnians (median age = 72 years), all of whom had had lived through the Siege of Sarajevo.² This figure provides information about the temporal distribution of the retrieved memories as well as the prevalence and distribution of recalled events that were dated

¹ The exception here is research that has focused on the role of social interaction in the development of autobiographical memory (e.g., Nelson & Fivush, 2004), and research concerned with the maintenance and distortion of personal, shared memories (e.g., Harris et al., 2014; Hirst & Echterhoff, 2012).

² The Siege of Sarajevo began in April, 1992 and end in December, 1995. During this period, access to food, water and electricity was limited, and people living in the city were often under fire (Andreas, 2008). Approximately, 10,000 lives were lost during the siege; almost 60,000 people were wounded (Tabeau & Bijak, 2005).

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