Mother–child reminiscing at risk: Maternal attachment, elaboration, and child autobiographical memory specificity

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ABSTRACT

Mother–child reminiscing, the process by which mothers and their children discuss past events and emotional experiences, has been robustly linked with child outcomes, including autobiographical memory. To advance previous work linking elaborative maternal reminiscing with child autobiographical memory specificity, the ability to generate and retrieve specific memories from one's past, it is essential to make distinctions among aspects of elaboration and to consider how maternal risk factors may influence the reminiscing context. The current study evaluated (a) an interaction between emotional and structural elaboration predicting child autobiographical memory specificity and (b) the potential moderating role of maternal adult attachment. Participants consisted of 95 preschool-aged children and their mothers. The sample was predominantly low income and racially diverse. Dyads completed a reminiscing task that was coded for emotional and structural elaboration. Mothers completed the Experiences in Close Relationships questionnaire (ECR-R) to assess attachment-related avoidance and anxiety, and children completed the Autobiographical Memory Test–Preschool Version (AMT-PV) to assess memory specificity. Results indicated that the association between structural reminiscing and child memory specificity was moderated by emotional elements of reminiscing. At high levels of emotional elaboration, mothers with high levels of structural elaboration had children with more specific memory than mothers with low levels of structural

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elaboration. Moreover, emotional elaboration (a) predicted less specific child memory without high structural support and (b) negatively predicted child specificity at high levels of maternal attachment avoidance and anxiety, a profile associated with fearful avoidance. Future directions and implications are discussed.

Introduction

Autobiographical memory (AM) refers to the recollection of personally experienced events and is determined by cognitive, affective, and social influences (Fivush, 2011; Reese, 2009). Autobiographical memory *specificity* is one aspect of AM that refers to the ability to recall *specific* memories of one-time personally experienced events (for reviews, see Valentino, 2011, and Williams et al., 2007). Difficulty in retrieving specific memories in response to cue words is referred to as overgeneral memory (OGM) or reduced AM specificity. Rather than referencing one exact and precise event, overgeneral memories include categorical responses that refer to repeated events or memories that refer to extended periods of time (Williams et al., 2007). Reduced memory specificity (i.e., OGM) has been observed among individuals with depression and trauma-related psychopathology and has been associated with the emergence and clinical course of these disorders, although further work is needed to clarify the nature and direction of these associations (see Moore & Zoellner, 2007, and Sumner, Griffith, & Mineka, 2010, for reviews). As such, identifying predictors of AM specificity in children is a critical research priority that may inform our understanding of processes that relate to the onset and maintenance of reduced memory specificity as well as normative AM retrieval. Moreover, it is particularly crucial to identify predictors of memory specificity during the preschool period, which is regarded as the time when skills central to the ability to recall and express AM emerge (Nelson & Fivush, 2004).

Early theoretical models of OGM posit that reduced AM specificity results from the functional avoidance of negative memories, which then generalizes to all retrieval (Williams, 1996). Further updates to this model primarily focus on cognitive mechanisms such as executive functioning in accounting for the etiology of OGM (e.g., Williams et al., 2007). In contrast, the developmental psychopathology (DP) model of OGM (Valentino, 2011) expands on these accounts by applying sociocultural approaches to memory development to the understanding of OGM and AM specificity. This model emphasizes the integration of normative developmental research on memory with OGM, highlights the relevance of predictors of typically developing child AM (e.g., maternal elaborative reminiscing) for understanding reduced specificity, and acknowledges that variables may positively or negatively predict specificity, depending on moderating factors in the broader developmental context. To date, little work has considered factors at multiple ecological levels or evaluated moderators of child memory specificity; doing so would provide critical empirical evidence to evaluate the DP model of OGM.

Mother–child reminiscing, the process by which mothers and their children construct interactive dialogues to discuss past events (Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006), is identified in the DP model as a robust contextual predictor of preschool children's AM, particularly in the context of reminiscing about children's emotional experiences. The ways in which mothers discuss and elaborate on past events with their children socializes child AM by influencing how children recollect their past and cope with and understand their emotions (see Fivush et al., 2006; Nelson & Fivush, 2004, and Valentino, 2011, for reviews). As such, the DP model hypothesizes that elaborative reminiscing will be a strong predictor of child memory specificity as well. Importantly, recent work has distinguished between *emotional* elaboration (e.g., how often mothers reference emotions and ask emotional questions) and *structural* elaboration (e.g., how often mothers provide new non-emotional information or ask for contextual details such as where events took place) during reminiscing (Fivush & Vasudeva, 2002; Larkina & Bauer, 2010; Sales & Fivush, 2005). Structural elaboration was found to be unrelated to child AM specificity in our previous report with this sample (Valentino et al., 2014), which did not