



A 3.5 year diary study: Remembering and life story importance are predicted by different event characteristics



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ABSTRACT

Forty-five participants described and rated two events each week during their first term at university. After 3.5 years, we examined whether event characteristics rated in the diary predicted remembering, reliving, and life story importance at the follow-up. In addition, we examined whether ratings of life story importance were consistent across a three year interval. Approximately 60% of events were remembered, but only 20% of these were considered above medium importance to life stories. Higher unusualness, rehearsal, and planning predicted whether an event was remembered 3.5 years later. Higher goal-relevance, importance, emotional intensity, and planning predicted life story importance 3.5 years later. There was a moderate correlation between life story importance rated three months after the diary and rated at the 3.5 year follow-up. The results suggest that autobiographical memory and life stories are governed by different mechanisms and that life story memories are characterized by some degree of stability.

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1. Introduction

Specific memories are representations of “a circumscribed, one-moment-in-time event. . . including what was seen, heard, thought, and felt” (Pillemer, 1998, p. 3). Thus, specific memories are characterized by a sense of reliving a past event. Some specific memories are retained only for a short time (e.g. breakfast this morning), whereas other specific memories persist for decades (e.g. visiting Empire State building) (e.g. Brewer, 1986; Conway, 2005; Rubin, Schrauf, & Greenberg, 2003). In addition, some specific memories are considered important to life stories, whereas other specific memories may be remembered but not considered important to life stories. Thus, remembering, reliving, and life story importance are considered distinct characteristics of specific memories.

Life stories are internalized stories about individuals’ lives characterized by temporal, causal, and thematic coherence. They are based on autobiographical memory and used to support identity and self-understanding (Bluck & Habermas, 2000; Bruner, 1990; Conway, Singer, & Tagini, 2004; Fitzgerald, 1988; McAdams, 1996, 2001; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007; Neisser, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1988). Although remembering and life story construction are related processes, they are not the same and hence they may be predicted by different event characteristics. Here, we examine whether processes

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that are involved in remembering and reliving are different from processes involved in the selection of specific memories as important to life stories.

Thus, we tested whether remembering, reliving, and life story importance of specific memories were predicted by similar or different event characteristics. We examined this by having 45 participants describe two events each week across their first term at university. They rated these events on several event characteristics, like unusualness, goal-relevance, and emotional intensity. After three and a half years, we examined which event characteristics predicted remembering, reliving, and life story importance. We also examined whether life story importance was consistent over time.

Below, we first review literature on the relationship between specific memories and life stories and describe how the self-memory system theory (e.g. Conway, 2005) explains the long-term retention of specific memories and their possible relation to life stories. Second, we review diary studies examining event characteristics associated with long term memories and selection into life stories. After reporting the results of the present study, we discuss the implications and suggest modifications to the self-memory system theory that follow from our results.

1.1. *Autobiographical memory and life stories*

Specific memories are a part of autobiographical memory, which refer to “memory for information related to the self” (Brewer, 1986, p. 26). Specific memories refer to events that can be located at a specific time and place in the individual’s past. While individuals retain many specific memories from the very recent past, most of these are thought to be forgotten, and only some specific memories are retained for longer periods of time (Conway, 2005, 2009). Recalling specific memories involves episodic memory, which is associated with distinct subjective experiences of remembering, like imagery, reliving of the original event, and a sense of travelling back in time (Brewer, 1986; Conway, 2009; Rubin et al., 2003; Tulving, 2002). We refer to these as reliving qualities.

Life stories are comprised of different types of autobiographical memory. Thus, life stories are constructed based on conceptual autobiographical memory, like facts (e.g. “I was born in Denmark”) and abstracted knowledge about important periods in the individual’s past (e.g. “when I lived in Ribe”) (e.g. Brown, Hansen, Lee, Vanderveen, & Conrad, 2012; McAdams, 2001; Thomsen, 2009). In addition, some specific memories are selected to become an important part of life stories. These different types of autobiographical memory are “storied” by autobiographical reasoning, whereby temporal order and causal links between the different parts of life stories and between life stories and selves are constructed (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McLean et al., 2007; Singer, Blagov, Berry, & Oost, 2013). Thus, specific memories that are important to life stories are connected to other life story material as well as selves. Recently, we have suggested that initial processing of the event may determine whether specific memories are selected as important to life stories and here we provide further support for this idea (Thomsen, Olesen, Schnieber, Jensen, & Tønnesvang, 2012).

Life stories are dynamic and dependent on time and social context and individuals may thus have different life stories. Although life stories are dynamic, some specific memories may generally be more likely to be selected as a part of life stories than other specific memories. Some degree of consistency in which specific memories are considered important to life stories may contribute to stability in life stories. Such stability in life stories would seem to be necessary if they are to provide individuals with self-continuity (McAdams et al., 2006). One study examining the stability of themes, emotional tone, and narrative complexity over a three year time interval also found evidence of some stability of these aspects of life stories (McAdams et al., 2006). In the present study, we further investigated the stability of life stories by examining whether the life story importance of specific memories is stable over time.

Some researchers have suggested that the term autobiographical memory should be reserved for memories that are truly a part of life stories, with the explicitly mentioned implication that the individual retains specific memories that are not autobiographical (Bluck & Habermas, 2000). However, here we take the position that specific autobiographical memories are characterized by reference to an event taking place at a specific time and place as well as certain subjective qualities (e.g. reliving, imagery, and mental time travel), rather than being a part of life stories. We then examine what distinguishes specific memories that become important to life stories from specific memories that do not become important to life stories.

In addressing this question, the self-memory system theory is highly relevant because it relates specific memories to life stories and attempts to explain the long-term retention of specific memories. In this theory, life stories are the top level in a hierarchically organized knowledge system (Conway, 2005; Conway & Jobson, 2012; Conway et al., 2004). According to Conway (2005; Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000), the second, third, and fourth levels in the autobiographical knowledge base include themes, consisting of broadly defined life themes, such as work and relationships; life-time periods, which consist of temporally extended autobiographical memory referring to periods in the individual’s life, containing information about the typical places, people, and activities associated with each period; and general events, which are either summarized representation of repeated events (categoric memories) or events referring to short time-intervals (short-term-temporally extended memory). At the lowest level of the hierarchical organization are episodic details, such as perceptual-emotional information. Life stories, themes, life time periods, and general events form part of the long-term self (Conway et al., 2004) or conceptual self (Conway, 2005). In addition, the self includes a working self, which consists of a complex set of hierarchically organized active goals (Conway, 2005, 2012; Conway et al., 2004). The working self operates to direct behavior and cognitive processes through for example the selective encoding and consolidation of specific memories (Conway, 2005).

According to the self-memory system theory, the construction of specific memories is based on a combination of the different parts of the self and the episodic memory system, which contains experience-near information, like summaries of

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