



The roles of gender and temporal distance in the recall of dissonant self-related memories



Azriel Grysman*

Hamilton College, 198 College Hill Rd., United States

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ABSTRACT

This study examined strategies employed to support a positive self-image in the face of dissonant self-related memories, especially focusing on the role of gender. Participants ($N = 498$) were recruited online and identified a self-descriptive trait. They then reported a memory of a time when they did or did not act according to that trait. Participants distanced themselves from dissonant, self-related memories by downplaying the event's importance and relevance to identity and by emphasizing their lack of agency and the degree to which they had changed. Additionally, participants reported dissonant events from further in the past than consonant events, a tendency displayed more strongly amongst women than men. Women also rated events as more pertinent to the self on questionnaire measures. Findings demonstrate ways that autobiographical memories are reported and organized to support a positive self-image, and deepen an understanding of the role of gender in this process.

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1. Introduction

The construction of a meaningful account of our experiences is an integral part of coming to terms with negative events in people's lives (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010a). Inevitably, bad things happen, we make mistakes, and situations that are beyond our control interfere with our daily lives; having a mechanism to come to terms with these occurrences is crucial for normal functioning. The experiment reported here aims to demonstrate how a positive self-image is supported when recalling a memory of violating a positive attribute of the self. Additionally, the experiment tested the degree to which gender differences play a role in how a person reacts to reporting an event in which his or her behavior contradicts that person's positive self-image.

1.1. Memory, self, and gender

The life story approach to memory (McAdams, 1985) stresses the process through which an individual integrates memories with a self-image. Telling personal stories enables one to make meaning out of events and connect them to an understanding of one's place in society at large, or in other contexts of one's life, such as family, religion, or gender (McAdams, 2008). Through constructing personal stories, a person establishes a sense of coherence that provides a sense of continuity through life (Habermas & Bluck, 2000) and makes connections between life events and one's self-image (Linde, 1993; Pals,

* Fax: +1 315 859 4807.

E-mail address: agrysman@hamilton.edu

2006). This coherent self-image is central to models of autobiographical memory. According to the *self-memory system* model (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000), individuals summarize across events to derive a stable representation of their characteristics, which is a representation of the self. Specific memories provide evidence for the summaries that people generate, and the life story is one way to summarize across memories (Conway, 2005). Thus, if a person has a memory that contradicts one's representation of self, then a way must be found to make sense of the self despite this event.

A recent review of gender differences in autobiographical memory (Gryzman & Hudson, 2013) highlights findings that suggest women may find self-dissonant memories more challenging to the positive self-image than men. The model outlined by Gryzman and Hudson (2013) emphasizes the role of parent–child conversations during early development of autobiographical memories (Nelson & Fivush, 2004). For example, it has been found that mothers discuss more information (Reese & Fivush, 1993), use more supportive speech (Leaper, Anderson, & Sanders, 1998), and more often ask evaluative questions (Fivush, Hazzard, Sales, Sarfati, & Brown, 2003) when speaking with daughters than with sons. Subsequent findings, including longitudinal research, have reported, for example, that girls use more evaluative language (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010b), more internal state evaluations (Fivush, Haden, & Adam, 1995), and use more emotion language (Dunn, Bretherton, & Munn, 1987). These findings suggest that, from an early age, girls, more than boys, are encouraged to report narratives of autobiographical events that emphasize evaluations and internal states, especially emotions.

As adults, women use more emotion language when describing self-consistent and self-discrepant behavior (Rice & Pasupathi, 2010), and write narratives that are longer and include more references to internal states (cognitions, emotions, perceptions, and physiological states, Bauer, Stennes, & Haight, 2003) than men's. Additionally, it has been found that women are more likely than men to identify a theme in their self-defining narratives (McLean, 2008) and simply have more to say about themselves (e.g. Bohanek & Fivush, 2010; Bohn & Bentsen, 2008). Although not all autobiographical memory studies find or even test for gender differences (Gryzman & Hudson, 2013), findings suggest that when gender differences are apparent, women have access to a greater amount of detail from their memories of self-related events, especially for information about thoughts and feelings (Davis, 1999).

Recent research has emphasized gender differences in autobiographical memory recall in ways that are especially relevant to violations of the positive self-image. For example, Schulkind, Schoppel, and Scheiderer (2012) found that women report richer, longer, and more evaluative personal event narratives than men, and Berntsen, Rubin, and Siegler (2011) found that women rated positive and negative events as more central to their lives than did men. Thompson, Skowronski, Larsen, and Betz (1996) reported that women's memories were more personally revealing than men's in a diary study, and Boals (2010) reported that women used more negative and fewer positive emotion words than men when describing a negative event in their lives.

Taken together, these findings suggest that women include more detail than men in recall of personal events, and more explicitly connect the details of their autobiographical memories to their self-images. Given these findings, the expectation in this study was that the drive to maintain a positive self-image in light of a dissonant self-related memory would be more powerful among women than among men.

1.2. Maintaining a positive self-image

Numerous strategies have been documented that contribute to how a person can maintain a positive self-image in the face of a negative memory. Negative events can be remembered as further in the past than they actually were, the importance of these events can be minimized, and individuals can emphasize positive consequences rather than personal errors. These three strategies are discussed in this section.

1.2.1. Temporal self-appraisal

One way in which a positive self-image is maintained is by keeping positive events close and pushing negative events far away. Wilson and Ross (2001; Wilson, Gunn, & Ross, 2009), in their *temporal self-appraisal theory*, demonstrated through numerous experiments that, in maintaining a positive self-image, people conceive of negative memories as further in the past and positive memories as closer to the present. Happy memories seem clearer (Levine & Bluck, 2004) and more detailed (Rasmussen & Berntsen, 2009) than unhappy ones, and so positive experiences are kept salient and vivid, making them feel closer to the current self and maintaining a positive self-image. For example, Ross and Wilson (2003) used a timeline to induce participants to feel closer or further away from a past failure. Participants who felt closer evaluated themselves less favorably than those who felt further away. Thus, by keeping negative memories further away and positive events closer, people use the temporal distribution of memories to maintain a positive self-image.

Temporal self-appraisal theory shows that by remembering positive memories as temporally closer to the present and retaining greater vividness and detail from these events, an individual attains evidence that confirms a positive, current self-image. This approach highlights one way that the drive to maintain a positive self-image is achieved. In a related study, Escobedo and Adolphs (2010) elicited autobiographical memories from 40- to 60-year-old participants. In one analysis, the narratives of these events were classified on three dichotomous variables: moral weakness/strength, doing the right/wrong thing, and hurting/helping someone. For all three of these classifications, and for events evoked by negative versus positive cue words, analyses found that negative events were reported five to eight years earlier than the positive events. The authors argue, in line with temporal self-appraisal theory, that recalling negative events from further in the past enables participants to maintain a criticism of their behavior that does not directly challenge their current positive self-image. This finding builds

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