



# Adults' reports of their earliest memories: Consistency in events, ages, and narrative characteristics over time



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## ABSTRACT

Earliest memories have been of interest since the late 1800s, when it was first noted that most adults do not have memories from the first years of life (so-called *childhood amnesia*). Several characteristics of adults' earliest memories have been investigated, including emotional content, the perspective from which they are recalled, and vividness. The focus of the present research was a feature of early memories heretofore relatively neglected in the literature, namely, their consistency. Adults reported their earliest memories 2–4 times over a 4-year period. Reports of earliest memories were highly consistent in the events identified as the bases for earliest memories, the reported age at the time of the event, and in terms of qualities of the narrative descriptions. These findings imply stability in the boundary that marks the offset of childhood amnesia, as well as in the beginning of a continuous sense of self over time.

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## 1. Introduction

Earliest memories have been a focus of research since the late 1800s, when it was first noted that most adults lack memories from the first 3 to 4 years of their lives (Henri & Henri, 1898; Miles, 1893), a phenomenon later labeled *infantile* or *childhood amnesia* (Freud, 1905/1953). Though there is wide variation about the mean, across methods and cohorts, the average age of adults' earliest memories is 3½ years (e.g., Dudycha & Dudycha, 1941; Rubin, 1982; Tustin & Hayne, 2010; Waldfoegel, 1948; West & Bauer, 1999). A number of characteristics of earliest memories have been investigated. Relatively neglected among the features that have been examined is the within-subject consistency of earliest memories. That is, there are very few data to address whether over repeated recall attempts, individuals retrieve the same memory as their "earliest," whether they date the event as having taken place at the same time in the past, and whether there is consistency in the qualities of the narrative descriptions of the earliest memory. The relative lack of data on consistency of earliest memories is striking in light of the substantial weight they bear in explanations of childhood amnesia (e.g., Freud, 1905/1953; Pillemer & White, 1989) and in theories of autobiographical memory and its development (e.g., Bauer, 2007, 2008, 2014; Nelson & Fivush, 2004), as well as their implications for a continuous sense of a self (e.g., Bluck & Alea, 2008; Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Habermas & Köber, 2014; Howe & Courage, 1993; Wilson & Ross, 2003). The purpose of the present research was to address this void by examining the consistency of adults' earliest memories over time.

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Childhood amnesia is virtually universal. Nevertheless, there is both individual and group variability in the age of earliest memory. In terms of individual differences, at the young end of the distribution, samples typically include reports of earliest memories from age 2 years or younger (e.g., Henri & Henri, 1898; Jack & Hayne, 2010; Rubin, 2000; Usher & Neisser, 1993; West & Bauer, 1999). Conversely, samples typically include individuals for whom the earliest memory is from age 6 to as late as 8 years of life (e.g., Bauer, Stennes, & Haight, 2003). The density of early memories also differs: some adults recall many early memories, whereas others remember only a few (e.g., Jack & Hayne, 2010; Weigle & Bauer, 2000; West & Bauer, 1999). In terms of group differences, a consistent finding is that women have memories from earlier in life than men. In some cases the differences are statistically reliable (e.g., Cowan & Davidson, 1984; Mullen, 1994, Study 2; Orlofsky & Frank, 1986; Waldfoegel, 1948) and in others they are not (e.g., Mullen, 1994, Studies 1 and 3; West & Bauer, 1999). Even when the differences are statistically significant, they tend to be small in magnitude (see Rubin, 2000, for an illustration). Birth order also relates to age of earliest memory. First born children have earlier memories than children who are later born (Mullen, 1994). There also are culture-group differences. For example, individuals of Maori New Zealand descent have younger earliest memories than individuals of European descent, who in turn have younger earliest memories than individuals of Asian descent (MacDonald, Uesiliana, & Hayne, 2000; see also Mullen, 1994; Wang, 2001). Great accessibility of early memories also is reported for individuals with secure vs. insecure attachment status (see Pillemer, 1998, for discussion).

There also has been substantial research on adults' ratings of the qualities of their earliest memories. One focus has been emotionality, addressing the question of whether earliest memories are devoid of emotion (as predicted by Freud, 1899/1962) or emotionally charged, and if emotionally charged, whether they are predominantly negative or positive. Based on adults' ratings, early memories frequently are of events that engendered strong emotional reactions (e.g., Dudycha & Dudycha, 1933a, 1933b; Howes, Siegel, & Brown, 1993; Kihlstrom & Harackiewicz, 1982). In some studies pleasant memories outnumber unpleasant ones (e.g., Kihlstrom & Harackiewicz, 1982), whereas other studies indicate a preponderance of negative affect (e.g., Bauer et al., 2003; Howes et al., 1993). The perspective individuals have on their memories also has received attention with some investigations indicating that third-person perspective is prevalent (e.g., Freud, 1899/1962; Henri & Henri, 1898) and others indicating prevalence of first-person perspective (e.g., West & Bauer, 1999). Whether earliest memories are perceptually detailed also has been of interest. In some research, adults rate their earliest memories as containing a good deal of perceptual information (e.g., Henri & Henri, 1898; Howes et al., 1993; Miles, 1893), whereas other studies suggest under-representation of such information (e.g., Johnson, Foley, Suengas, & Raye, 1988). In sum, in the 100-plus years since childhood amnesia was first reported in the literature, a number of characteristics of adults' earliest memories have been examined, yielding a rich—if not entirely consistent—picture of the nature of these first recollections.

Relatively neglected in the list of characteristics for which adults' earliest memories have been evaluated is consistency in the memories. It is clear that the average age of earliest memories among adults is consistent: as reviewed above, many studies have identified 3½ years as the average age of earliest memory among Western adults. Yet little is known about *within-subject* consistency across reports. Within-subject consistency of reports has not been ignored in the autobiographical memory literature as a whole. One case in point are studies of flashbulb memories (Brown & Kulik, 1977), for which questions of consistency have been of substantial interest (e.g., Neisser & Harsch, 1992; Pillemer, 1984; Rubin, 1992; Winningham, Hyman, & Dinnel, 2000). Other literatures that have focused on consistency of memory reports are those concerning the reliability of eyewitness testimony (e.g., Brewer, Potter, Fisher, Bond, & Luszcz, 1999; Smeets, Candel, & Merckelbach, 2004), and the stability of memories over changes in the status of relationships (Drivdahl & Hyman, in preparation), for example. In contrast to these areas of the memory literature, with few exceptions, individuals' earliest memories are sampled only once. As a result, we do not know whether (a) adults nominate the same event as their earliest memory time after time, (b) the age of the earliest memory is the same time after time, or (c) the narrative qualities of the memory reports are the same time after time.

The question of within-subject consistency in adults' earliest autobiographical memories is of special significance because of the role these memories play in establishing a stable sense of self over time (e.g., Habermas & Köber, 2014). In general, the ability to remember one's self in the past is a precondition for a sense of personal continuity (e.g., Prebble, Addis, & Tippett, 2013). Indeed, one of the three major functions of autobiographical memory is self-definition (social connective and directive functions being the other two: e.g., Bluck, Alea, Habermas, & Rubin, 2005; Pillemer, 2003). As the very first memory of a personally experienced event, earliest memories occupy a position of particular importance. Prior to the date of earliest memory, individuals have a physical presence, to be sure, but they lack a remembered self. Moreover, the observation of a rather sparse distribution of autobiographical memories for several years after the earliest memory (until age 6 or 8 years: e.g., Bauer et al., 2003; Jack & Hayne, 2010; Weigle & Bauer, 2000; West & Bauer, 1999), means that earliest memories bear a substantial portion of the burden for ensuring a stable sense of self over time and place for virtually the entire period of early childhood. By definition, there are no memories that predate them, and for most individuals, there are relatively few personal memories for years thereafter. These facts bring into stark relief the importance of the question of whether earliest memories are consistent over time. In effect, because we know relatively little about the stability of the memory that marks the beginning of self-continuity, we know little about the stability of the onset of a temporally continuous self.

There are theoretical reasons to expect either inconsistency or consistency in earliest memory. On one hand, because earliest memories—like other personal memories—are reconstructions that reflect the integration of social context, beliefs, and personal identity, they may change over time, reflecting individuals' changing perspectives on themselves and their lives (e.g., Conway, 2005; Hooker & McAdams, 2003; Hyman, 1999; McAdams et al., 2006). On the other hand, personal memories that are told and retold become more consistent over time (Barnier, Hung, & Conway, 2004; Stone, Barnier, Sutton, & Hirst,

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