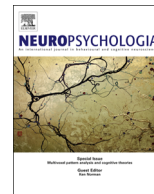




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Reviews and perspectives

Individuals with episodic amnesia are not stuck in time

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ABSTRACT

The metaphor that individuals with episodic amnesia due to hippocampal damage are “stuck in time” persists in science, philosophy, and everyday life despite mounting evidence that episodic amnesia can spare many central aspects of temporal consciousness. Here we describe some of this evidence, focusing specifically on KC, one of the most thoroughly documented and severe cases of episodic amnesia on record. KC understands the concept of time, knows that it passes, and can orient himself with respect to his personal past and future. He expresses typical attitudes toward his past and future, and he is able to make future-regarding decisions. Theories claiming that the hippocampus plays an essential role in temporal consciousness need to be revised in light of these findings.

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1. Introduction

The idea that episodic memory is required for temporal consciousness is common in science (Dalla Barba & La Corte, 2013; Tulving, 1985; Suddendorf & Corballis, 2007), philosophy (Hoerl, 1999; Singer, 2011), fiction (Nolan, 2000), and everyday life (Hilts, 1996). Related ideas follow naturally: that individuals with episodic amnesia are lost mariners (Sacks, 1970), stuck in time (Roberts, 2002), in a “permanent present tense” (Corkin, 2013) or “lost in a

non-time, a sort of instantaneous present” (La Corte et al., 2011, p. 314).

Yet recent evidence suggests that people with episodic amnesia are not stuck in time. Episodic memory and future thought are dissociable from semantic knowledge of time, attitudes about time, and consideration of future consequences in decision-making. These findings illustrate how little is known about the sense of time in episodic amnesia and suggest that the human sense of time is likely not one thing, but many things.

2. Temporal consciousness and semantic drift

People with extensive hippocampal damage have deficits in remembering past personal experiences (Tulving, 1983; Rosenbaum

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et al., 2005) and imagining future states of the self (Klein et al., 2002; Kwan et al., 2013; Race, Keane, & Verfaellie 2011; Maguire et al., 2010). Yet it is a stretch from this finding to the claim that amnesics are stuck in time or lack “temporal consciousness”.

Dalla Barba and La Corte, for example, justify this leap on the basis of a conversation between Endel Tulving (ET) and KC, who suffered extensive brain damage in a motorcycle accident and has become the definitive case of episodic amnesia. KC’s brain damage includes substantial volume loss in the hippocampus and the parahippocampal gyrus bilaterally, as well as several regions outside of the medial temporal lobe known to play a role in memory. The conversation about time is as follows:

ET: Let’s try the question again about the future. What will you be doing tomorrow? [15 second pause.]

KC: I don’t know

ET: Do you remember the question?

KC: About what I’ll be doing tomorrow?

ET: Yes. How would you describe your state of mind when you try to think about it?

KC [five second pause] Blank, I guess (Tulving, 1985, p. 4)

Asked to explain this remark, KC says, “It’s like being in a room with nothing there and having a guy tell you to go find a chair, and there’s nothing there,” or, “It’s like swimming in the middle of a lake. There’s nothing there to hold you up or do anything with” (Tulving, 1985, p. 4). These remarks are taken to justify the claim that KC and other episodic amnesics lack temporal consciousness (Dalla Barba & La Corte, 2013) and so are trapped in a permanent present (Corkin, 2013). Their life is a, “Humean froth,” a “fluttering on the surface” (Sacks, 1970). In this respect, they are like rats and young children (Roberts, 2002).

If temporal consciousness is defined simply as the ability to remember past personal experiences and to episodically imagine future personal experiences, then KC lacks temporal consciousness. Yet the meaning of the term “temporal consciousness” invites semantic drift; the definition of the term creeps away from its original meaning and, without our awareness, comes to denote a far more encompassing set of cognitive faculties. Dalla Barba and La Corte, for example, initially defined temporal consciousness as “awareness of one’s own past, present, and future” (La Corte et al., 2011) and now describe it as, specifically, “a form of consciousness that allows individuals to remember their personal past, to be oriented in their present world, and to predict their personal futures” [Dalla Barba & La Corte, 2013]. Temporal consciousness so defined comprises many cognitive faculties, including many that are preserved in people with severe deficits in episodic memory and future thought. Because KC has such a complete deficit in

episodic memory and future construction, he presents a unique opportunity to assess which aspects of the human sense of time can be preserved even when the memory systems of the medial temporal lobes are severely compromised.

3. Semantic knowledge of time

The above conversation between Tulving and KC is not a full accounting of KC’s temporal competence. Although he has an anterograde semantic deficit, his retrograde semantic memories, including autobiographical details, are intact (Tulving, 1985; Rosenbaum et al., 2005; Westmacott et al., 2001). He knows when he was born, that he went to high school and graduated, and that he visited New Orleans during college. He knows that his brother once lived and now is deceased. In this respect, KC is like other individuals with episodic amnesia who selectively retain semantic but not episodic elements of autobiographical memory (Klein & Nichols, 2012; Van der Linden et al., 1996). Importantly, KC can correctly order these and other notable personal life events on a timeline, though he tends to compress their distance from the present (see Fig. 1). This compression is perhaps explained by the fact that KC consistently underestimates his age by approximately 10 years (Corkin, 2013; Rosenbaum et al., 2005). Nevertheless, KC consciously understands time as a series of events ordered earlier or later than one another, irrespective of any reference to the present. That is, KC understands the B-series (McTaggart, 1908; see Fig. 1), and he knows his life is ordered and located in a B-series.

KC also understands the A-series (contra Hoerl, 1999; but see McCormack, 1999). In the A-series, future events come to pass and then recede, never to return, into the mists of history. Time flows forward; the future cannot affect the past. Consider a recent conversation with KC:²

SR: What is the future?

KC: Events that haven’t happened yet.

SR: What is the past?

KC: Events that have already happened.

SR: Can you change the past?

KC: No.

SR: Can you change the future?

KC: Yes

SR: How?

KC: By doing different things.

SR: Does what happened in the past influence what happens in the future?

KC: Yes.

SR: Does what you do now influence what happens in the future?

KC: I guess so.

SR: Does what you do now change what has happened in the past?

KC: NO.

SR: Can something that happens in the future change what has happened in the past?

KC: NO.

SR: If an event is in the future, will it *always* be in the future?

KC: NO.

SR: Why?

KC: Because time moves on.

SR: Once an event is in the past, will it *always* stay in the past?

KC: Yes.

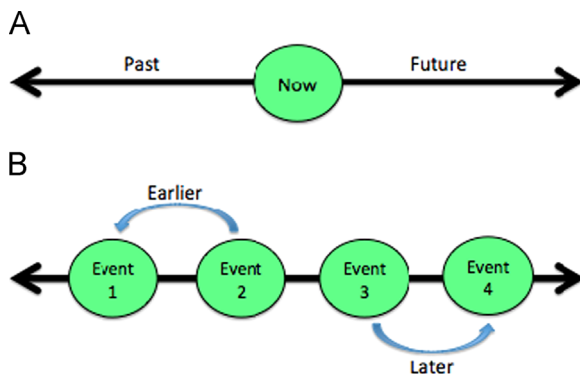


Fig. 1. Two concepts of time: the A-series (time flows; events in the future become present and then past) and the B-series (time as series of events arranged earlier or later than one another).

² Questions in the battery were devised by Carl Craver and Ben Graham and overlap with questions administered to the amnesic subject, D.B., by Klein (personal communication; see Klein, 2013).

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