



## Original article

# Benchmarking the past: Children's early memories and maternal reminiscing as a function of family structure



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## ABSTRACT

The present research explores the role of family structure and maternal reminiscing in childhood amnesia in middle childhood (age 7–11 years). Children from non-nuclear (solo parent, blended, extended;  $n = 13$ ) or nuclear families (two biological parents;  $n = 13$ ) were interviewed about their two earliest memories; they also reminisced with their mothers about shared past events. Children from non-nuclear families had earlier memories than children from nuclear families. Mothers from non-nuclear families generated shorter and less elaborative reminiscing conversations with their children than did mothers from nuclear families. For children from non-nuclear families, the number of extra adults in their household was correlated with earlier memories. Results are discussed with respect to both transition and social-cultural theories of memory development.

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Childhood amnesia refers to the relative paucity of autobiographical memories from the very early years of life (see Bauer, 2013; Hayne & Jack, 2011 for reviews). The age of an individual's earliest memory marks the beginning of autobiographical memory and the end of childhood amnesia (e.g., Reese, Jack, & White, 2010). Most adults' earliest memory is for an event that took place when they were 3- to 4-years old, but a well-developed body of research now shows that childhood amnesia differs as a function of socio-demographic and family factors. For example, experiencing family moves or attending preschool (Mullen, 1994), and being firstborn or female (MacDonald, Uesiliana, & Hayne, 2000; Mullen, 1994) are linked to earlier ages of first memories in young adult samples.

Identifying individual differences in childhood amnesia helps to elucidate the mechanisms responsible for this pervasive memory phenomenon. In this context, two additional individual differences have recently been shown to make a difference: (1) experiencing a change in family structure; and (2) growing up in an extended-family setting. Young adults from early-separated families (e.g., the separation occurred before the child was seven) have earlier childhood memories than do their counterparts from later-separated and non-separated families (Artioli & Reese, 2013). Young adults who grew up in an extended-family household also have earlier memories that are more densely spaced (Artioli, Cicogna,

Occhionero, & Reese, 2012; Artioli & Reese, 2013). In the present study, we examined the origins of the effect of early family transitions on childhood amnesia by assessing the relation between different family structures and the earliest memories of 7- to 11-year-old children.

Two theories of autobiographical memory are relevant for understanding at least some of the individual differences in childhood amnesia that have been reported in the literature, including changes in family structure: the transition theory of memory (Brown et al., 2009; Svob & Brown, 2012) and the social-cultural theory of memory development (Fivush & Nelson, 2004; Nelson & Fivush, 2004). According to transition theory, autobiographical memories are organized around major life transitions that enhance recall. For example, we know that adults remember more events from adolescence and young adulthood than from any other time of their lives. This phenomenon has been referred to as the reminiscence bump (Koppel & Berntsen, 2015). Berntsen and Rubin (2004) argued that events from this period of life loom large because it is a time when significant life events take place that shape our personal adult identity (e.g., graduations, beginning a career, marriage, childbirth). According to the transition theory, these *life transitions* form a benchmark that defines the end of one life period and the emergence of another, rendering events that take place around the benchmark more memorable (Svob & Brown, 2012).

Transition theory also offers a potential explanation for why individuals who experience important changes during early childhood might report earlier autobiographical memories. That is, events such as parental separation and divorce represent

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distinctive transitions in a child's life (e.g., Amato & Cheadle, 2005; Amato & Kane, 2011; Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000). People who once lived together no longer reside in the same household, and over time, new people may join the family group(s) (Artioli & Reese, 2013). These important transitions might provide a critical benchmark, making events that took place around the time of the transition more memorable. In this way, transition theory provides a potential explanation as to why individuals who experience transitions during early childhood, including early parental separation, might have an earlier offset of childhood amnesia.

The social-cultural account also provides a theoretical explanation for the relation between early separation and the offset of childhood amnesia. This theory of memory development highlights the importance of conversations with others, especially memory sharing with parents, for subsequent accessibility of memories later in life (e.g., Fivush & Nelson, 2004; Nelson & Fivush, 2004; Pillemer & White, 1989; Reese, 2009). Indeed, there is a well-established link between parents' elaborative reminiscing talk and children's memory development (Bohanek, Marin, Fivush, & Duke, 2006; Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006; Jack, MacDonald, Reese, & Hayne, 2009; Peterson & McCabe, 1994; Reese, Haden, & Fivush, 1993; Wang, 2006).

Parental reminiscing talk is defined as *elaborative* by the provision of new information about the past and confirmations of children's memory provisions. Open-ended elaborative questions (e.g., *What do you remember from the trip to Auckland to down here?*) are of special importance from a memory perspective because each new open-ended question provides children with valuable memory cues to aid their recall. Unlike elaborative statements (*Auntie Beth was there*) or closed-ended elaborative questions (*Was Auntie Beth there?*), open-ended elaborative questions encourage children to produce a memory in their own words. Moreover, open-ended elaborative questions provide children with organization during recall, which facilitates retrieval of relevant information in coherent ways (Farrant & Reese, 2000).

Like the transition theory of memory development, the social-cultural theory also provides a potential explanation for the relation between early family separation and childhood amnesia. Family separation not only represents an important life transition, but it also leads to changes in family structure and household composition that contribute to changes in the child's linguistic environment within the former household and in new households. Artioli and Reese (2013) found that young adults from early-separated parents reported living with extra adults in addition to parents in one or more households. The group from early-separated parents also reported earlier memories. What family members talk about, whom they talk to, and the way in which they describe the past is likely to be different when extra adults are present. Given the importance of the early linguistic environment in memory development (e.g., Fivush et al., 2006; Nelson & Fivush, 2004; Reese, 2009 for reviews), these changes are likely to be important for the offset of childhood amnesia.

The key questions for this research are whether family structure is related to differences in the offset of childhood amnesia during childhood, and whether mothers reminisce differently with children as a function of their family structure. Family process researchers have provided some preliminary evidence of differences in the linguistic environment for children from different family structures. For example, Branch and Camara (2000a, 2000b) performed qualitative analyses of dinnertime conversations in sole-parent versus two-parent families. Conversations in the sole-parent households were shorter overall and each topic less elaborated, than those in the two-parent households. Note that the construct of elaboration employed in the Branch and Camara studies was similar to that in the reminiscing literature employed within current work, but was analysed differently in

terms of extending and developing a range of conversational topics with the child, not just talk about the past. Talk about the past (reminiscing) is hypothesized to be especially important for children's autobiographical memories according to social-cultural theory. Also note that Branch and Camara's studies did not include families in extended households in which adults other than parents were present.

In summary, both the transition and social-cultural theories of autobiographical memory could account for the earlier offset of childhood amnesia in young adults from early-separated families (Artioli & Reese, 2013). For example, children from early-separated families experience a major life transition – parental separation and its concomitant changes in family structure – at or before age 6, which is closer to the age of childhood amnesia offset than for children whose parents separated later, at or after age 7. The separation per se could be used as a signpost to identify early personal memories. Moreover, children from early-separated families are more likely to grow up in extended-family settings, with a greater number of adults in the child-rearing environment (e.g., grandparents and step-parents), compared to children from later-separated families, who are more likely to grow up in sole-parent families (Artioli & Reese, 2013). Early parental separation could serve as a benchmark for early memories and could simultaneously increase the richness of the early reminiscing environment through the addition of new adults to the household, both of which would serve to lower the offset of childhood amnesia (cf. Artioli et al., 2012; Artioli & Reese, 2013; see also Miller, Potts, Fung, Hoogstra, & Mintz, 1990 for similar arguments about the role of extended-family on children's development).

Here, we examined childhood amnesia in 7- to 11-year-old children and maternal conversations about the past in nuclear two-parent families and non-nuclear families who experienced a transition such as separation or divorce. This age group was selected for two reasons. First, Bauer and Larkina (2013) documented a turning point in childhood amnesia across this age range. For example, although the rates of childhood forgetting show signs of slowing after age 7, forgetting rates still remain higher for children than for adults. These high rates of forgetting indicate that autobiographical memories are still undergoing substantial change through at least the first decade of life. Second, school-age children between the ages of 7–11 are capable of talking about past experiences in a coherent form and of positioning those memories in a spatial-temporal context, which yields richer autobiographical accounts than those provided by younger children (Reese et al., 2011).

To extend previous studies in young adults on the role of family structure in childhood amnesia offset, we explored mother-child reminiscing about events that children personally experienced, either within the last 6 months (*recent events*) or from age 3 to 5 years (*distant events*); and the offset of childhood amnesia for most adults). We focused on events from different epochs of the child's life because events in the distant past might be reminisced about differently by mothers who experienced a family transition than events that happened more recently, around or after the time of the family transition. We focus on mothers only in this study, and not fathers and other adults, because most of the research on parent-child conversations has been with mothers; however, we take into account the amount of time children in non-nuclear families spent in their fathers' care, and the number of extra adults living in the household. We note that we focus solely on mothers in this study to test for the social-cultural theory, which predicts that elaborative reminiscing with adults leads to earlier memories. The children from non-nuclear families are likely to experience reminiscing with other adults besides their mothers and fathers, and this extra-parental reminiscing could be having an additive effect in maintaining children's early memories. Thus, our focus on maternal reminiscing only is offering an even narrower window on the

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