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Editorial

Context and consequences of autobiographical memory development

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ABSTRACT

This special issue of *Cognitive Development* focuses on recent research examining multiple aspects of autobiographical memory, as well as its antecedents and consequences. It brings together leading researchers who have been investigating developing relations between autobiographical memory and other socio-emotional and cognitive developments. Articles in the collection take the study of the development of autobiographical memory well beyond the question of whether children remember the significant events of their lives to examine a number of potential determinants of remembering, including the characteristics of the child, the nature of the to-be-remembered event or experience, and both the "local" (socio-emotional) and more "global" (cultural) context of remembering. The work reported in the issue also examines the potential consequences of autobiographical memories for development of a personal or self-identity, family relationships, and emotional health and well-being.

The last decade has seen substantial interest in the emergence and early development of autobiographical or personal memory. Autobiographical memories are of specific events or experiences that are infused with a sense of personal involvement and ownership. They are the memories that make up our life stories and our personal pasts (see Bauer, 2007; Fivush, 2008, for reviews). Although autobiographical memory clearly relies on the development of basic memory processes, recent theorizing has posited that autobiographical memory is a uniquely human form of memory that develops in social and cultural contexts and that helps define identity and relationships over time. A model proposed by Nelson and Fivush (2004) explicates the multiple cognitive and socio-emotional components that both contribute to and emerge from developing autobiographical memories, and how these processes are modulated by individual differences, gender, and culture (see Bauer, 2007, for a theoretically compatible treatment). The model includes temperament, attachment, self-concept, theory of mind, and social interaction, in addition to basic memory processes, and discusses how these components are related to autobiographical memory as it develops within specific cultural contexts. This special issue of *Cognitive Development* focuses on recent research examining multiple aspects of autobiographical

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memory, as well as its antecedents and consequences. It brings together leading researchers who have been investigating developing relations between autobiographical memory and other socio-emotional and cognitive developments.

Until the middle 1980s, it was widely believed that autobiographical memory not only was a uniquely human form of memory, but one that made a relatively late appearance ontogenetically as well. There were several sources of the belief that young children essentially lacked autobiographical memories (see Bauer, 2006, 2007, for discussion). One of the most compelling was the literature on *infantile* or *childhood amnesia* (see Bauer, 2008, for a review). Most adults experience a so-called amnesia of childhood: they remember few if any memories from the first 3 to 4 years of life and from the ages of 3.5 to 7, they have a smaller number of memories than would be expected based on forgetting alone. The phenomenon was documented at the end of the 19th century (Miles, 1893) and given the name *infantile amnesia* early in the 20th century (Freud, 1905/1953). It is strikingly robust and consistent across time, population, and method (e.g., free recall, response to cue words, questionnaire). Although a variety of explanations for the amnesia have been advanced (see Bauer, 2007, 2008; Nelson & Fivush, 2004; Pillemer & White, 1989, for reviews), one of the most common was also the simplest: adults lacked memories from early in life because children failed to create them.

The perspective on young children's memory abilities began to change in the middle 1980s as a result of recognition of the importance to memory of meaningful and familiar stimuli. Until that time, research on children's memory frequently used as stimuli lists of words or pictures. In some cases, the lists included related items (e.g., several pictures of animals interspersed with several pictures of clothing items), but in many experiments, following the tradition established in the adult literature (as early as Ebbinghaus, 1885), the materials were virtually devoid of meaning or structure. This allowed researchers to examine the properties of memory (e.g., speed of acquisition, decay rate, etc.) without the potentially confounding factor of familiarity (and in the developmental literature, potentially *differential* familiarity, as a function of age and experience).

Swimming against this current, Nelson (1978, 1986) and her colleagues demonstrated the importance of personal relevance or meaning of an event for memory performance. Rather than asking 3- and 4-year-old children to recall lists of words or pictures, they asked them to report "what happens" in the course of everyday events and routines such as making cookies and going to McDonald's (Nelson, 1978, 1986; Nelson & Greundel, 1979). The children readily complied with these requests, providing what at the time were surprisingly rich reports of their experiences. Their responses reflected appreciation of the goals of the events in which they engaged and the children's temporal ordering of the actions within the events was virtually flawless. Moreover, children did not require multiple experiences of events in order to remember them. For example, Fivush (1984) interviewed kindergarten children after only a single day of school. Although the children had experienced the school-day routine just once, they represented it accurately.

These early investigations were followed quickly by a number of studies documenting young children's abilities to remember the events of their lives (e.g., Fivush, Gray, & Fromhoff, 1987; Fivush, Hudson, & Nelson, 1984; Hamond & Fivush, 1991; Hudson, 1986; Myers, Perris, & Speaker, 1994; Todd & Perlmutter, 1980; see Fivush, 1994, for an overview). By the close of the 20th century, the body of work had grown so substantial that at least among developmental psychologists, the fact that young children remembered significant life events no longer was in doubt. The focus had shifted away from tests of whether (or not) young children remembered, to investigations of the factors that affect the emergence and early development of autobiographical memory. Many of the architects of this shift are featured in this special issue. Their work highlights several of the growing list of factors that predict autobiographical memory. The contributions to this special issue highlight multiple ways in which characteristics of the rememberer, the remembered event, and the social emotional context of remembering, interact to produce memory, as well as why memory matters for the developing child in terms of self-concept, emotional well being, and maintaining relationships with others.

The first three articles in the special issue concern what we might be characterized as the social–emotional context of remembering, and how it affects what is remembered both in conversational reminiscing between mothers and children and in children's own developing memory of specific events. In the first contribution, Marina Larkina and Patricia Bauer, elaborate one of the most robust contextual determinants of early autobiographical memory, namely, the ways in which mothers