IN DIVERSITY THERE IS STRENGTH: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MEMORY RESEARCH SAMPLER

John J. Skowronski
Northern Illinois University

In this introduction, the author argues that methodological concerns induced early experimental psychologists to shy away from research that used autobiographical memories as stimuli. Consequently, no dominant paradigm or theory developed and the study of autobiographical memories was left to various other subdisciplines of psychology. These subdisciplines brought with them a variety of theoretical concerns and empirical methods. The author argues that these concerns and methods have been carried forward into current autobiographical memory research and cites the present compilation as evidence. The author further suggests that the diversity prompted by the early marginalization of autobiographical memory research ultimately may have been a boon to the area, in that it yielded a similar diversity in theories and approaches that makes the area well-positioned for the future.

Regular readers of Social Cognition may experience a sense of déjà vu when they take a peek at this special issue. Indeed, a volume devoted to autobiographical memory appeared in this journal just a few issues ago. That special issue explored new theoretical perspectives in autobiographical memory. This special issue explores some recent empirical approaches to the topic and is a companion to that earlier volume.

The original plan was for all the articles to be part of the same special issue. However, they were split into two companion volumes because of the fine quality of the articles that were submitted and the lengthiness of many of the articles. Rather than squeeze all of the articles into a

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Address correspondence to John J. Skowronski, Department of Psychology, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL 60115; E-mail: jskowron@niu.edu.
“mega-issue,” Social Cognition’s publisher thought that the journal would be better served by constructing two separate special issues. Hence the publication of two special issues, both devoted to the topic of autobiographical memory. We thank the publisher for agreeing to allow the publication of all of the articles, in their full glory, without the truncation that would have been necessary to squeeze them all into one volume.

WHENCE DIVERSITY? SOME HISTORICAL CONTEXT

One of the attractions of working in the area of autobiographical memory is that it is a melting pot of ideas that have been developed across multiple subdisciplines. One can speculate that this diversity is a consequence of the fact that, until relatively recently, psychologists who did basic research in memory never developed much of an interest in autobiographical memory. Consequently, no dominant paradigm for studying autobiographical memory developed and no dominant theory of autobiographical memory emerged.

Early memory researchers’ relative lack of interest in autobiographical memory could be understood by examining a bit of history. As psychology developed into a science, experimental psychologists took responsibility for doing basic research in memory. For a long time, these experimental psychologists were largely philosophical disciples of Ebbinghaus (1885) in their approach to research. That is, as befits excellent experimental technique, many experiments presented stimuli that were selected by the researcher to have particular characteristics that were determined from pretesting. Such pretesting helps to avoid confounds in research.

Often, as in the case of the nonsense syllables often used in early memory research, one of these characteristics was that the stimuli were devoid of personal meaning to participants. Whether such an approach is the correct one is certainly debatable. Bartlett (1932, 1935) was one early critic of this approach, arguing that psychologists who study memory avoided the study of exactly the kinds of meaningful stimuli and recall contexts that were important to the action of memory in the real world. Similar criticisms later were offered by Neisser (1978).

Regardless of whether one agrees or disagrees with the research strategy employed by the early memory researchers, one consequence of their approach was that they did not place much emphasis
on the study of autobiographical memory. One reason for this was that the study of autobiographical memories requires a researcher to give up some of the control over stimuli that is so desirable in experimental settings. In autobiographical memory studies, it is the participants who provide the stimuli. Consequently, there are many characteristics of those stimuli that cannot be easily controlled (e.g., an event’s age, typicality, emotion-producing characteristics, and self-relevance). These characteristics can serve as potential confounds when interpreting the results of studies that use such memories. A second reason to avoid studying such memories was that researchers were interested in the fundamental properties of a unified memory system. Because the memory system was seen as a unified system, the content of the memory was not really important to an exploration of the system’s properties. One could understand the memory system equally well by studying memory for nonsense syllables or for personal events. From this perspective, because pretested nonsense syllables were not beset by a host of annoying confounds, it simply made more sense to use them in experiments than to use the “messier” autobiographical events that people could provide.

The fact that early experimental psychologists did not emphasize the study of autobiographical memory does not mean that such memories received no empirical treatment. Instead, the study of autobiographical memory was left to a number of other areas of psychology, each of which had its own theoretical approaches and its own methods of study. Many of the themes that exist in contemporary research into autobiographical memory were already established in first half of the 20th century (for more detail see Burnham, 1888; Herrmann & Chaffin, 1988).

A number of factors likely spurred cognitive psychologists to take a new look at autobiographical memory. Tulving’s (1972) theorizing was undoubtedly one of them. In postulating an episodic memory system, Tulving gave cognitive psychologists a theoretical reason to study autobiographical memory. If Tulving were to be believed, to gain an understanding of the characteristics of the episodic memory system, one has to study episodic memories, many of which are autobiographical in nature. Neisser’s (1978) argument about the need to study the kinds of memories that people use in everyday contexts also was undoubtedly a spur to research. Finally, the increasing recognition that meaning and structure are important to memory (e.g.,
Schank & Abelson, 1977) likely spurred research into autobiographical memories, which seem to be especially likely to be characterized by such meaning and structure.

A CONSEQUENCE OF INDIFFERENCE: THE PERSISTENCE OF DIVERSITY

Regardless of the reasons, in the last 30 years, autobiographical memory has emerged as a hot research topic, even among those who would self-identify as cognitive psychologists. However, the nature of the current research in the area retains the influences of the various subdisciplines that carried the autobiographical memory “torch” in the days when it was not a central focus of memory researchers. Three of the articles that are presented in this special issue can be seen as examples of such influences. The other two articles reflect the more recent influences that cognitive psychologists have had on the study of autobiographical memory.

The first article in this compilation, by Norman Brown, reflects the more modern cognitive influence. Because of its cognitive roots and methods, I suspect that this article will, perhaps, feel most comfortable and familiar to many readers of Social Cognition. Brown’s article is concerned with detecting the traces of organization in autobiographical memory. The article uses an event cueing method to seek evidence that autobiographical events are organized in memory and to explore the nature of that organization. The results indicate that autobiographical memories are both thematically and temporally organized. This result is interesting in light of the fact that other research (including some of my own; see Skowronski, Walker, & Betz, 2003) found evidence of temporal organization but not of thematic organization. It is likely that this discrepancy is the result of Brown’s idiographic methodology, which probably is more sensitive to the presence of the unique thematic structures that organize each individual’s autobiographical memories. In contrast, the Skowronski et al. studies made a priori guesses about the themes that might organize autobiographical memories across people, and these guesses might have been wrong.

The second article in this compilation, written by Bernstein, Laney, Morris, and Loftus, also should feel fairly familiar to readers of this journal. The paper explores false memories. Interest in such false memories has a long intellectual history. For example, in his Confessiones, Augustine argued that false memories are possible
when “we fancy we remember as though we had done or seen it, when we never did or saw at all” (see Augustine as translated by Wills, 2002). Recent research (Loftus & Pickrell, 1995) has documented empirically that such memories can be “implanted,” especially when the falsely recalled event is perceived to be highly plausible. The Bernstein et al. article provides further evidence for the psychological reality of such memories by showing that they have behavioral implications. That is, if a person can be induced to believe that they became sick after eating a certain food (e.g., pickles), their later self-reports reflect avoidance of that food.

This line of research always has intrigued me, especially because the research generally is conducted by psychologists who self-identify as cognitive, but the nature of the research itself is essentially social. That is, one of the things that strikes me about this research is the ease with which it can be viewed through the lens of social psychology (e.g., see Betz, Skowronski, & Ostrom, 1996). For example, if one rewords things so that the phenomenon is described as a matter of persuasion—one has to persuade the participants that they experienced the event—then it seems that all those classic variables that have been explored in the attitude change domain (e.g., communicator credibility and social consensus) can be grafted on to the false memory paradigm. This is just another example of how autobiographical memory research can be conducted in ways that reflect and integrate multiple research traditions.

The third article in this compilation, by Sales and Fivush, similarly reflects the fruitfulness of such integration. Fivush’s research has long pursued both social and developmental elements of autobiographical memory (e.g., see Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 1996). One of the fundamental insights that has come out of this research program is that autobiographical memory is far more social in nature than anyone imagined. Fivush has shown that autobiographical memory capabilities develop, in part, as a result of caretaker–child interactions. Children who are encouraged by caretakers frequently to produce autobiographical event narratives do so at an early age and tend to have better autobiographical memory skills than children who are not encouraged. Moreover, cross-cultural research (e.g., Wang, 2001) suggests that the content of autobiographical memories is shaped by the kind of content that is encouraged in these early caretaker–child interactions. From these interactions, one literally
learns the kinds of things that should be included (or not) when one describes events to others.

The Sales and Fivush article describes research that continues to pursue these themes. The research reported in the article reflects a semi-naturalistic approach to the study of autobiographical memory, in that it explores ongoing interactions between mother and child as the two discuss chronically stressful and acutely stressful autobiographical events. Content analyses of these interactions seem to show that the content of discussions differs across event types for both mothers and children. Mothers who discussed a chronic stressor often tended to include explanations or emotions in their discourse, but did not do so when discussing acute stressors. These descriptive tendencies seemed to be related to (and may have influenced) the child’s own descriptions of those events, so that they match the content of the mothers’ communications. An additional outcome of the study takes this line of research in a new direction: the content of the discussions was predictive of child well-being. Children seemed to exhibit fewer behavioral problems when mothers talked to them more about emotions and provided more explanations about a chronic stressor. These results suggest that mothers’ conversations with children may provide those children with an explanatory framework for understanding events, and that such a framework is functional in the sense that it provides a buffer against the effects of a chronic stressor.

Functionality plays an even greater role in the fourth article in this compilation, by Bluck, Alea, Habermas, and Rubin. These authors suggest that autobiographical memory is functional in several ways. It serves to: (1) guide present and future thought and future behavior; (2) promote continuity and development of the self; and (3) develop, maintain, and nurture social bonds. Intriguingly, one can argue that such functions can be biologically adaptive. Sedikides and Skowronski’s (1997) speculations about whether the self can be thought of as an evolved trait suggests that the self serves similar functions. In their view, the capacity of an individual to construct an autobiographical memory that serves these functions might reflect the operation of natural selection, which benefits those who can use the self to their advantage when planning future behaviors and interacting with others.

Bluck and colleagues describe the development of an assessment tool, the Thinking About Life Experiences (TALE) questionnaire,
which was designed to assess these functions. Their tale of scale development (sorry!) reveals the presence of the postulated behavior–directive and self–continuity functions of autobiographical memories. There is a surprise in their research story: the researchers’ analyses suggest the presence of two separate social functions to autobiographical memory instead of the single social function that they thought would emerge. One of these social functions is devoted to developing relationships and the second is devoted to nurturing relationships.

One of this journal’s missions is to publish research that is devoted to understanding the cognitive processes that influence social emotions, thoughts, and interactions. Bluck et al.’s article contains none of the process tracing methods that often are a hallmark of such articles; hence, it might seem an odd fit for the journal. I argue that the article fits with one of the more implicit goals of the journal: to serve as a vehicle that supports studies that integrate research from across areas (but that also includes social and cognitive elements). After all, social cognition originated as an attempt to better meld ideas from social and cognitive psychology—fields that had long operated in relative ignorance of each other. I suggest that the Bluck et al. piece represents an attempt (and one that is fairly typical of autobiographical memory research) to look at cognition in its broader social, motivational, and self contexts.

This notion of broad context, as well as the notion of functionality, should be kept in mind when reading the last of the articles in this compilation, by Hehman, German, and Klein. This article describes a case study of an individual who has late–stage Alzheimer’s disease and the extent to which the disease has affected self–recognition. One of the things that has been thought to characterize Alzheimer’s is the loss of a sense of self. The research team on this paper wondered if that loss would be reflected in peoples’ ability to recognize their self–image. They found that, at least in the patient that was the focus of their study, there was a deficit. The patient had great difficulty recognizing recent self–photos, but relatively little difficulty recognizing old photos.

What does this have to do with autobiographical memory? In my view, plenty. Certainly, as noted by Bluck et al., theorists recently have begun to emphasize the role of autobiographical memory in the development and maintenance of the self. Thus, as Hehman, et al. note, the failure of this Alzheimer’s patient to recognize recent
self–images could be construed as a failure of the individual’s ability to update and maintain the self. However, the results of the study also are interesting for their implications for the study of autobiographical memory. Researchers might be interested in whether this failure is relatively restricted to recent self–images or if it is more general, characterizing recall for many different kinds of recent self–relevant information. Such ideas are derived from theories that explore the modularization of the mind (e.g., Pinker, 1997), which often suggest that such modules (such as visual, semantic, and affective modules) can be affected by diseases like Alzheimer’s in relatively independent ways. These kinds of dissociations have been observed in other case studies (see Campbell & Conway, 1995).

**DIVERSITY IS A STRENGTH, NOT A WEAKNESS**

Some might be overwhelmed by the diversity represented in this compilation of articles. It certainly does not fit with the prototypical paradigm of science, in which an area of research is characterized by a dominant theory and a small set of dominant methodologies that are used until the theory and/or methods have played themselves out. When that happens, scholars gravitate to new theories and methods, and, in so doing declare that “progress has been made.” Because the theoretical ideas and methods used are so different across autobiographical memory studies, this paradigm is unlikely to characterize autobiographical memory research.

Some might wonder whether such research will ever yield any systematic progress (e.g., Banaji & Crowder, 1989). I would argue that it already has, especially because much of the research is extremely programmatic and increasingly driven by theory. Moreover, the progress that is being made is exciting exactly because it involves ideas that are derived from multiple sub–domains of psychology (e.g., Klein, German, Cosmides, & Gabriel, 2004; Levine & Pizarro, 2004; Skowronski & Walker, 2004; Conway, Pleydell–Pearce, Whitecross, & Sharpe, 2003).

In this regard, we might do well to keep an example from biology in mind. Evolutionists contend that a diverse species is a healthy species. They say that a species is best protected from disaster when it has a large and diverse gene pool from which to draw. Such diversity allows a species a better chance of survival if there is a shift in environmental conditions. By that standard, autobiographical memory research is extremely well–prepared to move into the future. The the-
oretical and empirical diversity is in place and the area is prepared to move forward, as the conditions that control natural selection (e.g., the results of studies) shape the theoretical future of the area.

REFERENCES


