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Does manipulating age in earliest memories affect narratives more than snapshots?

Ineke Wessel, Akke-Marij D. Ariesen, Jildou J. Stapert & Vanessa Tapken
University of Groningen, The Netherlands

Introduction
• Adults’ relative inability to recall early childhood experiences is referred to as childhood amnesia.
• It is generally assumed that age estimates of early memories are accurate, with an average age of 3.5 years (Wang & Peterson, 2014).
• Yet, estimating age may be a reconstructive process depending on context. Previous work shows that age-information in the experimental set-up affects reported age (e.g., Kingo, Bohn & Krajgaard, 2013).
• Especially narrative memories may be sensitive to age information (Wessel, Schweig & Huntjens, 2016).

Narrative vs snapshot memories
Narrative memories have a story-like structure, with a beginning and an end and a sequence of events in temporal order.

Fragment / Snapshot memories are isolated scenes, decontextualized pieces of information, without a temporal order.

(Cf. Bruce et al., 2005)

Aims
• Replicate Wessel et al.’s (2016, study 1) finding that a late age prime renders higher ages in earliest narrative memories than in snapshots.
• Explore how narrative and snapshot memories differ in terms of autobiographical memory characteristics.

Method
Participants: 465 college and university students with a Western cultural background
Design: 2 (age prime) x 2 (memory type), between participants
Material: Online Questionnaire
• Primes were vignettes, containing
  • Age 6-8 (Late) or no age (Control)
  • A fragment/snapshot or narrative structure
• Describe earliest fragment or narrative memory
• Date memory
• Memory Experiences Questionnaire – Short form (MEQ–sf, Luchetti & Sutin, 2016) plus additional characteristics (Bruce et al., 2005)

Primes- Examples
Control / Snapshot: I remember myself being in the pool with my dad. We were down the waterslide together. We went really fast. I really liked it and we must have gone down the slide ten times or more. Afterwards we played with a ball. My mum was there too. I wasn’t wearing any floaties, so I must have been seven or eight years old. I still like going to the pool.

Late / Narrative: I remember myself being in the pool with my dad. We were down the waterslide together. We went really fast. I really liked it and we must have gone down the slide ten times or more. Afterwards we played with a ball. My mum was there too. I wasn’t wearing any floaties, so I must have been seven or eight years old. I still like going to the pool.

Results

<table>
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<th>Age Estimates*</th>
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<th>Late</th>
<th>Narrative</th>
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</table>

The late condition reported higher age estimates than the control condition (F(1, 356) = 4.94, p < .027, η² = .014). No significant interaction emerged (F(1, 356) = 2.07, p = .151, η² = .006).

An analysis limited to memories that were snapshots or narratives according to experimenter ratings yielded similar results.

Conclusions
• Including a relatively late age in the instructions for retrieving an earliest memory rendered higher age estimates than no age information (cf. Wessel et al., 2016).
• Age in snapshot memories was younger than in narrative memories (cf. Bruce et al., 2005).
• Contrary to earlier findings (Wessel et al., 2016) the present findings suggest that age primes do not differentially affect age estimates in snapshots and narratives.
• Narrative memories differed from snapshot memories on the majority of characteristics as measured by the MEQ. The memory types did not differ with respect to intensity of emotion, duration, rehearsal and observer/field perspective.
• All in all, the results add to the evidence that the estimated age in memories of early childhood experiences can be affected by external circumstances. This has implications for legal cases in which early childhood memories play a role.

Literature

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