Does manipulating age in earliest memories affect narratives more than snapshots?
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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 & Krøjgaard, 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-s; Luchetti & Sutton, 2016) plus additional characteristics (Bruce et al., 2005).

Primes- Examples

Late / Narrative: I remember myself being in the pool with my dad. We went 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 picked up a ball. My mum was there too. I wasn’t wearing any floaties, so I must have been seven or eight years old. I think I’m going to the pool.

Control / Snapshot: I remember myself being on top of a waterslide. Someone else was there but I can’t remember who it was. The slide was white and green and there were bright lights around us. There were big glass windows, so it must have been an indoor pool. I don’t know which swimming pool it was.

Results

• The late condition reported higher age estimates than the control condition (F1 = 12.70, p < .001, \( \eta^2 = .035 \)).
• The narrative condition reported higher age estimates than the snapshot condition (F1 = 4.94, p = .027, \( \eta^2 = .014 \)).
• No significant interaction emerged (F1, 356) = 2.07, p = .151, \( \eta^2 = .006 \).
• An analysis limited to memories that were snapshots or narratives according to experimenter ratings yielded similar results.

Compared to snapshots...

• More negative
• More vivid
• More sensory features
• More coherent
• Clear time perspective
• More accessible
• Remembered rather than known

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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