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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).

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 & Sutin, 2016) plus additional characteristics (Bruce et al., 2005)

Primes- Examples
Late / Narrative:
I remember myself being on the 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.

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 did it again. After that, we were outside and there was a lot of noise. I don’t remember any details, so I must have been seven or eight years old. It isn’t like going to the pool.

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

Literature

Results
- The late condition reported higher age estimates than the control condition (F(1, 356) = 12.70, p < .001, ηp² = 0.035).
- The narrative condition reported higher age estimates than the snapshot condition (F(1, 356) = 4.94, p = .027, ηp² = 0.014).
- No significant interaction emerged (F(1, 356) = 2.07, p = .151, ηp² = 0.006).
- 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.