

Definitions of Autobiographical Memory

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This chapter addresses a major concern voiced formally and informally at the conference, that of definition. It is argued that there is no problem with the definition of autobiographical memory that is not inherited from the definition of memory itself. Moreover, a common concept of autobiographical memory would be a mistake for a group of scientists who vary so in their beliefs of what constitutes evidence, methods, and theory. All that is needed is a language that is usually mutually intelligible. By adapting studies from different approaches, researchers can make greater progress than they could by forcing their work into a more uniform shared set of principles. The study of autobiographical memory allows and demands interaction across disciplines in a way that is difficult to find elsewhere. This interaction has already yielded insights that would be difficult to obtain in other ways and holds promise for the advancement of individual programs of research.

Interdisciplinary interest in autobiographical memory is new and growing. A conference like this would have been unthinkable a decade ago. Although many of us were then working on problems similar to the ones we presented over the last three days, we would not have met together to discuss them. The potentials and the problems of the range of approaches to science presented here need to be considered. I use the term approaches to science because I think the potential for mutual benefit is great in the general area of autobiographical memory and the difficulties do not arise at the level of autobiographical memory itself. Rather, we all come to the study of autobiographical memory with different ideas of our sciences, different purposes, different needs, different ideas of what a good answer would look like, and even of what a good question would be. The trick is to maximize mutual growth.

Let me be more specific. I believe there is no problem with the definition of autobiographical memory that does not exist with the definition of memory itself. That is, the concept of autobiographical memory is as clear and no clearer than the concept of memory. The view put forth by Allen Baddeley in his opening remarks is correct. Autobiographical memory is used by researchers as a topic, and as a special faculty or system, and as a feature of cognition. But these possible definitions apply to the term

memory as much as the term autobiographical memory. Memory is a topic, a special faculty or system, and a feature of cognition. The problem is brought to our attention here first because memory is an old term, which is part of our native languages, whereas autobiographical memory is not and second because we are interacting across disciplines and are thus not allowed to keep our comfortable implicit definitions.

Given the breadth of interests here a lack of consensus would hold for any term such as autobiographical memory. Why? Consider the disciplines and subdisciplines involved. At this conference were present scientists of at least the following types with guild credentials in the discipline of psychology. There are neuro-psychologists who study people with damage to known areas of the brain and who therefore tend to define autobiographical memory as a physical or physiological system with parts that if damaged, damage the system in particular ways. There are clinical psychologists who also study less than optimal functioning, but who are more likely to look for different reasons for loss, such as distractions from affect, the impact of early environment, temperament, or personality. They need not view autobiographical memory as a physiological system but can. Related to this approach is that of individual and group differences in healthy people. There were even cognitive psychologists who want to build models and mechanisms, but not necessarily psychological mechanisms, or affect driven mechanisms, or individual difference mechanisms to explain behavior. These cognitive psychologists could split along any of Allen Baddeley's different views of autobiographical memory. There were developmental psychologists who are used to integrating over different disciplines but who are unified in their belief that watching behavior unfold over the course of a life is necessary to understanding. Here it was close to the whole life from conception to old age that was considered.

There were even some Ph.D students who reported doing their theses on the topic of autobiographical memory and who have had the benefit of reading across areas of psychology without being hampered by the usual boundaries many of us have had. I find these the most encouraging for our progress. With luck they will be trained to deal with ambiguities and differences across fields.

Other disciplines are important here as well. Literary criticism, theories of narrative, and cultural anthropology have all been cited as helping us understand the conventions our culture uses to structure our narrative, and therefore our memory, and therefore our reality. These are weighty claims.

Sociologists presented papers looking at issues of autobiographical memory, but with the advantage of stratified samples of thousands of people and with statistical methods that most of the participants here will never have the degrees of freedom to use. Even statisticians have entered the fray with sophisticated models of dating errors. These different disciplines and subdisciplines are not just different for historical or social reasons,

they are working at different levels of analysis from the underlying neurology, to the mind, to the person, to the culture and society, and they are working with different kinds of theory and data. The concept of narrative structure as shaped by culture and the concept of bilateral frontal lobe lesions are hard to talk about in the same way, but they can inform each other.

A common concept of autobiographical memory or even memory would be a mistake for a group of scientists who vary so in their beliefs of what constitutes evidence, good methods, and good theory. All that is needed is a language that is usually mutually intelligible and a willingness to learn from each other. We have that and we have more. We have sets of phenomenon, sets of concepts, and sets of data that we can all appreciate. Moreover, among the papers there are many places where our findings reinforce each other, provide each other with new insights and methods, and allow converging evidence in ways we could not have easily foreseen.

Let me give two examples of how work that I have been conducting has been informed by studies presented here from other disciplines. As an experimental psychologist, or in more modern terms a cognitive psychologist, I have been interested in reminiscences in autobiographical memory, defined as an increase in memories from adolescence and early adulthood above that which would be expected from a monotonically decreasing retention function. I learned much here from other cognitive psychologists, but also from people in other disciplines. Outside my discipline, Schuman introduced a theory from sociology that predated by decades the ideas that Wetzler, Nebes, and I as well as others in this room had. He also discussed the use of data from thousands of people from stratified samples of different cultures that could verify the basic finding of reminiscence while suggesting new interpretations of it. His work even suggests a new developmental critical period in adolescence.

I have also been interested in dating accuracy, again as have many others here in cognitive psychology. Another sociologist, Auriat, provided converging evidence that dating errors will be off by plus or minus a year, or two, or three - even when the month is correct. The large size of her sample allows questions to be asked about interpreting sub-samples in order to make inferences about how dating is done. Moreover, the stratified nature of the sample allows generalizations to be made that are not possible from most of the data psychologists collect. Similarly work from many other fields have informed these and other issues, and I hope that my behavioral data has contributed to fields outside of my own.

What we have here is a set of common interests in phenomenon, in how the mind works, and in human nature that allow these disciplines to support and enrich each other. Rather than attacking or criticizing our neighboring disciplines and subdisciplines, we find something of use in them we can borrow and something we can contribute. Some

interactions will not be productive, but many are already more exciting than anyone could have hoped. For instance, in the past, I had found little use in my work for much that I read in clinical psychology. But recently, by adding terms like repression, suppression, and depression to my vocabulary, I get clarification of terms like specific versus general, and categoric versus extended. This is a great trade. With luck this happened with each paper here for the work of at least one other person.

Will we have a common concept of autobiographical memory, or of memory, or even of science in 10 or 100 or 1000 years? I doubt we will for autobiographical memory unless the neuro-psychologists find an isolated system that we all agree is close enough to our own concepts of autobiographical memory. I would not bet on this, though I might bet on a similar question for another topic such as spatial memory. Nonetheless, we will have common phenomena, theory, and data that are better understood than they could have been from study in the isolated subdisciplines presented here.

Many methodological questions of local concern, which have generated considerable local heat and little local light when put in our current interdisciplinary context are not as divisive. There are many methods. Most will serve the function of "the best method" for some question. Should one work in the laboratory or in the "real world"? Well, what do you want to know? Sometimes, as in Huttenlocher's or Christianson's research, you move in and back. Data from events of actual interest to survey researchers or the police are compared with data collected in similar ways from laboratory subjects. Each data set adds information that converges on an answer neither could do alone.

Should one study individual damage cases and combine only interpretations - never individual observations, or should one group cases of similar diagnosis, though differences among patients exist? In the context of questions of whether one needs samples of thousands of subjects properly stratified to make generalizations or whether one can get by with twenty undergraduates from a particular introductory psychology course in a particular university, or even fewer middle class children of parents who are willing to come to the laboratory, the first question gains a new perspective. Tolerance is needed to see what question a method is best at answering. If a method in the end provides little knowledge, and if other methods are known and available, the less useful method will be little used and there will be little need to argue about it in the abstract.

Autobiographical memory is a fascinating and productive topic to study for many reasons. I have argued here for one in particular: that it allows and demands communication across disciplines in a way that is difficult to find elsewhere. The phenomenon involves all the approaches demonstrated in this collection of papers in an integral and central way. Each can benefit and contribute to at least some of the others. In situations like this with alternative theories, alternative methods, and converging evidence progress can be rapid.

Note

This chapter was given as the final discussion of the conference and retains some of the style of its presentation. I wish to thank all the participants for their help, but especially Craig Barclay and Mark Williams who argued with me about the talk late into the night.

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