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AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MEMORY TASKS: SIX COMMON METHODS

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Of all the areas of cognition described in this book, the methods used to study autobiographical memory are those based least on traditional laboratory research. Historically, they owe their roots more to Galton, a founder of individual differences research, than to Ebbinghaus, a founder of the dominant laboratory memory tradition (Robinson, 1986). Recent developments have been influenced nearly as much by concepts and methods from life span developmental psychology as by cognitive psychology. In autobiographical memory, the information to be recalled is about events that occurred outside the laboratory and long before the test session. Moreover, there is usually no correct answer, or a least none known to the experimenter. Nonetheless, there are many similarities with the other methods considered in this volume.

In chapters 14 and 15, we review six ways autobiographical memory has been studied, as summarized in Table 13.1. The most common method in both experimental and clinical research, and the one to which we devote the most attention, is the word-cue method from experimental work (and its parallel Autobiographical Memory Test in clinical work). In this procedure, participants are presented with a cue, usually a single word, and instructed to

TABLE 13.1
Summary of Autobiographical Memory Methods

Method	Conditions of Retrieval	Stimulus	Clinical Application
Word-Cue	Free association	Words or pictures	Analysis of memory specificity, retrieval latency, and affective tone and its relation to pathology
Life Narrative	Free association	"Tell me your story"	Analysis of coherence of trauma narratives and their relation to pathology
Involuntary Memory Diary	Free association	Daily circumstances	Correlation between self-reported ratings of intrusive memories and pathology
Autobiographical Memory Interview	Structured interview	Questions probing successive life stages	Examination of semantic and autobiographical memory in pathology groups
Diary Recall	Probes from diary	Diary entries	None at present
Questionnaire	On-line judgments about memories	Structured questions	Examination of properties of traumatic memories

recall the first autobiographical memory that comes to mind. We also discuss two diary methods that, though they are less used in the experimental literature and are used hardly at all in clinical research, are appropriate for addressing fundamental questions of interest to clinical research, particularly the way memory content changes over time and the nature of the involuntary memories. Moreover, we examine a structured interview for assessing different types of autobiographical memories (e.g., episodic and semantic), a life narrative method, and questionnaire items designed to assess properties of autobiographical memories, such as the accompanying sensory experience.

Because of the richness and variety of methods used to study autobiographical memory, which method to use and how to adapt it to the questions at hand are not easy decisions. It is important for researchers to carefully consider the questions they wish to answer and the relevant theory before selecting and adapting a method. Although we describe established autobiographical memory protocols that exist in the literature to date, these methods are flexible and can be modified to examine new research questions. The information listed in the table under clinical application summarizes the manner in which the methods have been used with clinical populations to

date. As work continues to progress in these areas, we expect to see these methodologies adapted and used with additional populations.

Autobiographical memory research reflects a unique balance of rigorous methodological implementation in contexts closer to real-world tasks. On the one hand, stimuli included in tasks must be carefully normed, and coding schemes to assess aspects of participants' must demonstrate acceptable reliability. On the other hand, in autobiographical memory research, participants' recollections potentially can lead to the uncovering of important variables relevant to the etiology and maintenance of psychopathology in a more open-ended and direct fashion than can more controlled modes of investigation. We invite researchers to apply existing methods with clinical populations as well as to modify these methods for their own purposes to add to this rich source of data.

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COGNITIVE METHODS

and Their Application
to Clinical Research

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