How the Self Affects and Reflects the Content and Subjective Experience of Autobiographical Memory

LISA K. LIBBY and RICHARD P. EIBACH

In an episode of the sitcom *Seinfeld*, Jerry’s relative tells him that he is writing his autobiography and then adds, redundantly, “It’s about all of my experiences.” At the risk of seeming redundant ourselves, we will begin by defining autobiographical memory, in its most general form, as memory of one’s life: one’s past experiences and past selves. In this chapter we will explore the connections between autobiographical memory and the self.

Annotating the writings of his father, James Mill (1730/1869), John Stuart Mill concluded, “The phenomenon of Self and that of Memory are merely two sides of the same fact” (p. 175). His argument was that the links between these two phenomena are so strong that in fact they are the same thing. This characterization is probably too extreme: there are aspects of the self that do not depend on autobiographical memory (e.g., Klein, Lofus, Trafton, & Fuhrmann, 1992), and there are aspects of autobiographical memory that are influenced by factors other than the self-concept (e.g., Kunda, Fong, Sanitioso, & Reber, 1993). However, despite the fact that self and autobiographical memory can be defined as separate constructs, they are intricately entwined. Our sense of who we are shapes our memory of the personal past and our memory of the personal past shapes our sense of who we are. In the process of considering these relationships it is important to understand two basic facts about autobiographical memory: it is reconstructive and it involves subjective experience.

**AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MEMORY IS RECONSTRUCTIVE**

Although it may be a common belief that remembering the past is like flipping through a photo album (Loftus & Loftus, 1980), a long tradition of research in psychology has shown that the process of remembering is more like a paleontologist’s
work in piecing together a dinosaur from bits of bone (Bartlett, 1932; Neisser, 1967). Memories of the past are reconstructed in the present, which means that one’s present goals, attitudes, and motivations influence one’s view of the past. For this reason, what one recalls is almost never an exact replica of what actually happened. One’s memory may confabulate certain details of past events while excluding other details. Further, one’s memory may leave out certain events entirely, or even include events that never occurred. The question we will explore in the first half of this chapter is how people’s sense of who they are and their motivation to protect desired self-views influence their reconstruction of the past. In the second half of the chapter we explore the reverse question—how one’s reconstructed view of the past influences one’s sense of self.

**AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MEMORY INVOLVES SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE**

Traditionally, research on autobiographical memory has focused on the contents of what people recall—which details or which events they remember or misremember. However, autobiographical memory entails more than just the facts of what is recalled. Our memories of the past are accompanied by a variety of different subjective experiences, e.g., feelings of reliving, mental images of the past event, and a sense that it seems either recent or long ago in time. A growing body of research is beginning to explore these experiential aspects of memory, investigating their connections to people’s sense of self. For example, we have all had the experience that sometimes past events pop effortlessly to mind, whereas other times we must exert a great deal of mental energy to dredge them up. Some of the earliest empirical work on the subjective aspects of memory has investigated the relationship between ease of recall and self-judgments. Other early research on the subjective aspects of autobiographical memory studied the fact that events can be replayed in one’s mind with varying degrees of vividness, and showed that this element, too, has important relationships with the self.

More recent empirical work on the subjective experience of memory has examined the intriguing fact that our subjective sense of how long ago events occurred does not always map onto their objective distance in time. Friends at college reunions will relive their undergraduate antics, remarking, “it seems like yesterday,” whereas graduating seniors looking back on awkward moments from freshman year feel as if those events occurred ages ago. It turns out that beliefs about the self contribute to feelings of temporal distance and feelings of temporal distance can impact beliefs about self. Another recent area of interest involves the mental images people experience as they recall past events. An interesting fact about these images is that they are not always pictured from the “first-person” visual perspective that was experienced as the event unfolded. Sometimes people picture past events from the “third-person” perspective of an outside observer, so that they see their past selves in the image. As we will describe, one’s visual perspective on the past is intimately related to one’s self-concept.

In each half of the chapter, after describing research on the relationship between self and the content of autobiographical memory, we devote a section to reviewing the new and exciting findings linking self to subjective experiences in autobiographical memory.

**THE SELF AFFECTS AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MEMORY**

The Self Affects the Contents of Autobiographical Memory

Researchers have explored the ways in which aspects of the self influence the content of autobiographical memory. In this section we review how the cultural definition of self, self-knowledge, and the motivation to self-enhance can influence the content of what people recall from their lives.

Cultural Definition of Self The very basic notion of what a self is can structure the way we encode our experiences and later recall them. This may be difficult to appreciate within a given culture, but looking across cultures with different notions of self makes the connection clear. One factor that contributes to the development of self and one’s subsequent ability to recall early experiences is how, and how much, parents talk with their toddlers about events from the toddler’s past. Such conversations are structured largely by the parent and are greatly influenced by cultural assumptions about selfhood. In individualistic cultures, parents tend to spend a good deal of time talking with their toddlers about their toddlers’ past experiences. Moreover, the child and the child’s unique attributes are the central focus in the event narrative. On the other hand, in collectivist cultures, parents talk less with their toddlers about their toddlers’ past experiences, and when they do engage in such talk, parents focus more on behavioral expectations and social roles rather than the child’s individuality (Mullen & Yi, 1995).

Because toddlers from Western cultures are taught to think about past experiences more often and in a more self-focused manner than toddlers from Eastern cultures are, it might be expected that adults from Western cultures would be more likely than adults from Eastern cultures to remember such early experiences. Indeed, in a set of studies involving Asian and American adults, American participants had reliably earlier first memories (Mullen, 1994). In addition, differences in the content of first memories across cultures fits with the different notions of self: Western adults’ first memories are more likely to be focused on the self, whereas Eastern adults’ first memories are more likely to be focused on collective activities (Wang, 2001). Other research demonstrates that these cultural differences in the content of memories appear in memories from all life periods (Wang & Conway, 2004).

Self-Knowledge Beyond a general notion of what a self is, people also have mental representations of their own particular selves—their unique attributes and theories about whether these attributes are the type that typically change or remain the same over time. This self-knowledge, as well as the way it is structured, influences the content of autobiographical memory by affecting how events are
encoded, which ones are selectively retrieved from memory, and what types of inferences are retrospectively drawn about what must have been.

Schemas are cognitive generalizations, built up from experience, that influence the way we interpret, organize, communicate, and remember information (Bartlett, 1932; Neisser, 1967). Just as we have schemas for objects, events, and other people, we also have schemas about ourselves. These schemas are believed to result from efforts to organize, summarize, or explain one’s own behavior in particular domains, or along particular dimensions (Barclay & Subramaniam, 1987; Markus, 1977). When asked to recall events from their lives that are related to a given trait, individuals who have developed a self-schema on that dimension can recall more of such events in less time than those who have not (Barclay & Subramaniam, 1987; Markus, 1977).

There are at least two reasons why autobiographical memories related to a given trait are more accessible among those who have developed a self-schema on that dimension. First, self-schemas can influence the way people think about events as they occur: people are more likely to take note of a particular experience and may encode it in a richer fashion when it is relevant to a self-schema (Barclay & Subramaniam, 1987). Second, schemas may produce biases in the judgments people make during the process of reconstructing the past. Evidence for this comes from a study that tested individuals’ memories for events they had previously recorded in diaries. The researchers fabricated a number of events that varied in consistency with participants’ self-schemas and then presented participants with a list including the fabricated events along with some real events. Participants were more likely to mistakenly claim that the fabricated events actually occurred when those events were consistent with their self-schemas than when they were not (Barclay & Wellman, 1986). Because participants never experienced these events, any effect of self-schemas on memory must have occurred as participants attempted to recall the past.

In addition to mental representations of their traits and characteristics, people also have implicit theories about whether such attributes tend to change or remain stable over time (Ross, 1989). When people’s implicit theories are correct, it is difficult to determine whether their memories reflect accurate retrieval of past events or reconstruction based on theories. The role of implicit theories is easier to detect when people’s implicit theories are incorrect. For example, many people overestimate how much women’s mood and physical symptoms change according to their menstrual cycle. McFarland and colleagues (McFarland, Ross, & DeCoville, 1989) found that the more strongly women subscribed to this incorrect theory, the more likely they were to remember feeling worse than they actually did on a day during their menstrual period.

Although people expect some attributes to change over time, they expect other attributes to remain stable, and these theories also influence their memories. For example, people often assume that their political opinions remain fairly constant over time, and results of a study by Levine (1997) suggest that people apply such a theory when recalling their reactions to past political events. She found that the more participants’ political opinions had changed since the event they were recalling occurred, the more inaccurately they recalled their past reactions to a political event—specifically, the error was in the direction of participants’ current opinions.

Our discussion of self-knowledge thus far has omitted one particularly important aspect of the self-concept: its relational nature. As William James (1890) put it, “[A] man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him” (p. 294). Modern empirical research is consistent with the idea that representations of self shift according to social context (Markus & Kunda, 1986). If the self influences the content of autobiographical memory, then as one’s self-concept shifts across different contexts, the content of autobiographical memories should shift accordingly. Immigrants are an interesting population in which to investigate this hypothesis. Immigrants live in bicultural worlds—they continue to use their native language and cultural knowledge when interacting with their families and immigrant friends, but use their new language and cultural practices when interacting with people from their new culture. Ross, Xun, and Wilson (2002) found that the language in which immigrants communicate cues the working self-concept that fits with that cultural environment. A study by Marian and Neisser (2000) suggests the corresponding impact on autobiographical memory. They recruited students who had immigrated to the United States from Russia and asked them to recall autobiographical memories in response to one-word cues. The crucial manipulation in this study was the language in which the interview was conducted. Results showed that participants were more likely to recall events from their lives in Russia when interviewed in Russian, but more likely to recall events from their lives in the United States when interviewed in English. As different selves were activated by the linguistic environment, so too was the corresponding set of autobiographical memories.

The relational nature of the self-concept can also affect memory by influencing how a person describes personal experiences to others (Skowronski & Walker, 2004). Descriptions of experience are often guided by a goal of communicating information about oneself to an audience, including information about one’s goals, preferences, and traits. Self-knowledge can influence the selection of experiences to describe and also can shape the nature of these descriptions by sharpening some event details and leveling others in order to present a clearer self-portrait. Through this process, memory of the event may become distorted in the direction of the self-concept. The event may also come to be represented as semantic knowledge about the self rather than as a specific episode (Skowronski & Walker, 2004).

Self-Enhancement Greenwald (1980) likened the self to a totalitarian regime that revises history to portray itself in the most positive light. This may be an overstatement: we have already discussed a number of factors other than self-enhancement that influence autobiographical memory. However, self-enhancement certainly plays a role. John Dean’s memory of the events leading up to the Watergate scandal provides a good example. What makes the study of Dean’s memories particularly interesting is the fact that Nixon had secretly tape-recorded a number of the conversations about which Dean testified. Comparison of Dean’s memories to those records revealed that, although Dean recalled the gist accurately, he had reconstructed events in a way that inflated his self-image...
THE SELF

(Neisser, 1981). Bahrick, Hall, and Berger (1996) obtained more systematic
evidence for self-enhancing memory biases in a study in which participants
misremembered their high school grades as being significantly better than they
turned out to be when transcripts were examined.

In addition to influencing the way people reconstruct the details of an event,
self-enhancement motivation can also affect the accessibility of events in memory.
People may be biased to retrieve particularly positive autobiographical memories
when they receive threatening feedback pertaining to the self. For example, Parrot
and Sabini (1990) asked undergraduate participants to recall high school experi-
ences after they had just received midterm exam grades. Participants whose
grades were lower than they anticipated recalled significantly more positive high
school experiences than did participants whose grades were higher than they
anticipated. This biased retrieval of positive autobiographical memories may have
helped to reduce some of the emotional sting of the disappointing news about the
low-performing students’ exam grades.

Other research is consistent with the idea that when people want to think of
themselves in a certain way, memories that corroborate that self-view often come
to mind more easily. For example, in one study, participants were either convinced
that introversion or extraversion was predictive of success and then were asked to
recall examples of both types of behavior from their own pasts. Not only did
participants recall more examples consistent with the desired self-view (regardless
of whether it was introversion or extraversion), but they recalled events related
to the desired self-view more quickly as well (Sanitioso, Kunda, & Fong, 1990).
These results suggest that a motivation to think positively of the self can lead
people to selectively recall events that demonstrate desired characteristics.

On the other hand, a motivation to self-enhance does not always lead people to
recall their past selves in a positive light—in fact, it can sometimes cause people to
highlight the negative in their pasts (Wilson & Ross, 2000). Why would people
who wanted to feel good about themselves recruit memories of their past faults
and foibles? The reason is, negative past selves can make the present self look good
in comparison. If self-enhancement sometimes leads people to recall the past in a
positive light and sometimes in a negative light, how are we to predict how self-
enhancement will influence a person’s memory on any given occasion? One way to
approach this question is to conceptualize past selves as an interconnected chain
of individuals who vary in their closeness to the present self. Near past selves reflect
directly on the current self, whereas distant selves provide a point of contrast.
Following this line of reasoning, Ross and Wilson’s (2000) temporal self-appraisal
theory predicts that a motivation to self-enhance will cause people to recall their
near past in a rosy manner, but recall their distant past as less impressive so that
their present selves seem positive in comparison. This basic effect has been
observed in a variety of studies. Further evidence for the role of self-enhancement
motivation comes from the fact that the effect does not occur for memories of
others’ life events, and it is most pronounced on dimensions that people consider
important to their self-definition (Wilson & Ross, 2001).

The Self Affects the Subjective Experience of
Autobiographical Memory

We have discussed how different aspects of the self influence the content of
autobiographical memory. As it turns out, these same aspects of the self also
influence the subjective experience of remembering the personal past.

Cultural Definition of Self Researchers studying culture and self have often
pointed to two opposing bits of folk wisdom from the west and east. In Western
cultures, “The squeaky wheel gets the grease,” whereas in Eastern cultures, “The
nail that stands up gets pounded down.” Clearly the two cultures have different
beliefs about the value of asserting one’s individuality versus fitting in with the
group. Cohen and Gunz (2002) hypothesized that situations in which one is at the
center of attention (e.g., giving a public speech), and thus has the potential to
stand out too much, would be particularly likely to heighten Eastern individuals’
concerns about fitting in. For this reason, such situations should prompt Eastern
individuals to think about how they appear in the eyes of others, leading them to
picture such events from the third-person perspective. Cohen and Gunz asked
Asian and Canadian participants to recall memories of such events in which they
were the center of attention and memories of events in which they were not
(e.g., jogging). Asian participants were more likely to use the third-person perspec-
tive to picture events in which they were the center of attention than to picture
events in which they were not. No such difference emerged among Canadian
participants. These results suggest that cultural ideologies of the self influence
how people visually experience past events in memory.

Self-Knowledge In our own research we have studied how an aspect of self-
knowledge—perceptions of change in the self—can influence imagery perspective
in autobiographical memory. This work emerged from an observation that people
who change often express a sense of disidentification with their past selves.
For example, consider the way one woman described how joining the feminist
movement changed her:

I feel as if I woke up one morning to find myself completely different . . . I am
just not the same person I was three months ago. I look back and cannot
believe that I was her. (Goodman, 1979, p. 69)

This “not me” reaction shows up across a variety of domains in which people
experience personal transformations, e.g., religious conversions, recovery from
addiction, cancer diagnosis. In an investigation of this phenomenon, we found that
just as self-change can lead people to talk about their past selves as if they were
different people, self-change can lead people to picture their past selves as if they
were different people, as well: participants were more likely to visualize a past
event from a third-person perspective if they believed that they had changed since
the event occurred. This pattern emerged in correlational studies in which partic-
ipants recalled events related to changed or stable aspects of themselves, and also
in experimental studies that manipulated perceived consistency between the present and past self (Libby & Eibach, 2002).

Further research suggests why self-change produces this shift in memory perspective. When recalling an event, people can focus to varying degrees on different aspects of the event. For example, people can focus more or less on the concrete details of the experience and they can focus more or less on the broad meaning of the event in their lives. We have found that people focus less on the details of a past event and more on its broad meaning when it is related to a changed dimension of themselves than when it is related to a stable dimension. This is likely due to the fact that people are motivated to make sense out of inconsistencies in their life history (Ross & McFarland, 1988), and integrating discrepant pieces of information requires a broader analysis. In other studies we found that focusing on the broad meaning of an event as opposed to its details causes people to picture that event from the third-person perspective, and that a shift in focus from details to broad meaning accounts for the tendency for changed people to recall discrepant past selves from the third-person perspective (Libby & Eibach, 2007).

Self-Enhancement  Research by Ross and Wilson (2002) reveals that the motivation to self-enhance plays a role in determining how long ago events feel in time. Following from their temporal self-appraisal theory, they predict that a motivation to enhance the present self should cause negative past events to feel more distant in time and positive accomplishments to feel more recent. Indeed, this appears to be the case. For example, in one study individuals were randomly assigned either to think of a time when they did something they were embarrassed about or a time they did something they were proud of. Then they were asked to indicate how recent or how long ago that event felt to them. Controlling for the actual amount of time that had passed, individuals’ responses indicated that embarrassing moments felt more distant in time than proud moments did. Further aspects of this study support the claim that this result is due to self-enhancement motivation. There was no effect of event valence on subjective temporal distance when recalling events from an acquaintance’s past. Moreover, the effect of valence on subjective distance for autobiographical events was moderated by self-esteem, with high self-esteem individuals showing the effect more strongly than low self-esteem individuals (Ross & Wilson, 2002). Together, the results from this study make the point that the motivation to self-enhance influences how recent or distant autobiographical events feel.

The motivation to defend the self against threatening information can also influence the intensity of affect that people experience when recalling autobiographical experiences. The affect associated with negative experiences tends to fade more quickly than the affect associated with positive experiences (Walker, Vogl, & Thompson, 1997). One reason for this fading affect bias may be that people are motivated to minimize the implications of negative experiences in order to protect a positive self-view (Walker, Skowronski, & Thompson, 2003). The fact that negative affect fades more rapidly than positive affect may help to explain why survey respondents often report high levels of satisfaction when reflecting on their lives (Walker et al., 2003). The fading affect bias may also help to explain why negative experiences feel more distant in time than positive ones: events may feel more distant in time when one does not relive the original emotions.

Thus far, we have described how the self affects the content of autobiographical memories as well as the subjective experience of recalling them. It is not difficult to imagine how some of these processes might feed back and reinforce the aspect of self that inspired the memory. For example, the motivation to distance negative past selves is predicated on the assumption that this actually improves one’s current self-view. Next we will focus on research that isolates the effect of autobiographical memory on the self. We will review evidence showing that not only what people recall from their pasts, but also how they experience those memories, affects the inferences they draw about themselves.

THE SELF REFLECTS AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MEMORY

The Self Reflects the Contents of Autobiographical Memory

The events people recall from their lives (whether those events are real or fabricated) as well as which aspects of events people focus on in memory can influence their sense of self—their beliefs about their traits and preferences, as well as how generally happy they think they are.

False Memories  We have all experienced episodes where we were confident that we remembered something accurately but later discovered that things were not quite as we recalled them. Even experts on memory fall prey to such lapses: Neisser (1982) reports that he had a vivid recollection of hearing about the Pearl Harbor attack while listening to radio coverage of a baseball game, which he later realized must have been a football game because nobody plays baseball in December. Although we all recognize the fallibility of memory for details, not everyone appreciates the extremes of memory distortion that are possible. For instance, many people would find it hard to believe that a nondelusional person could have a confidently held memory for a complex episode that was entirely fictitious. However, memory researchers have now documented many such cases of false memories (Loftus, 2003). Moreover, once people accept a false event as true, they appear to realign their notions of themselves to become consistent with the event.

In one of the most dramatic cases, Paul Ingram, an evangelical Christian and police officer, “recovered” repressed memories of his participation in ritualized satanic abuse of his daughters (Wright, 1994). Evidence that Ingram’s recollections were confabulations was obtained when Ingram was successfully convinced that he had recovered a memory that the investigators knew to be false because they had fabricated it to test his memory. If Ingram’s “recovered” memories were indeed false then this case is a remarkable example of how a person’s self-concept can be influenced by memory. Ingram, who had previously believed himself to be a law-abiding citizen and devout Christian, was led to believe that he was capable of Satan-worship, severe child abuse, and ritualized killing.
More definitive evidence that false memories can affect inferences about the self has been obtained in experimental studies. Specifically, it has been shown that a person’s beliefs about his or her own tastes and preferences can be influenced by false memories for childhood experiences. Collins (2001, cited in Bernstein, Laney, Morris, & Loftus, 2005) found that participants who were induced to recall a false memory of being attacked by a dog in childhood were later less likely to prefer dogs as pets compared to control participants. In a related study, participants who were led to believe that they had become ill after eating pickles in childhood were more likely to report an aversion to eating pickles compared to participants who had not been convinced that they had this childhood experience (Bernstein et al., 2005). Research in this area is still in its infancy, and future work may reveal the conditions that promote or inhibit the effect of false memories on the self-concept.

Memory Accessibility False memories represent a rather exotic case in which memory shapes self-perceptions. There are many other more ordinary circumstances under which certain life events, or aspects of those events, become accessible in memory and thereby influence the self-concept.

One feature of the memory retrieval process that affects the accessibility of information is the phrasing of the question that prompts the person to recall. If we want to know how satisfied you are with your life we can either ask how happy you are or we can ask how unhappy you are. In either case pleasant and unpleasant experiences are relevant to answering the question. However, the general tendency to seek confirmatory information in response to a question (Klayman & Ha, 1987) should lead you to retrieve more examples of happy experiences when we ask how happy you are and more examples of unhappy experiences when we ask how unhappy you are. If this biased retrieval of confirmatory evidence affects the self-concept then you should conclude that you are more satisfied with your life if you are asked the “how happy” question than if you are asked the “how unhappy” question. Kunda et al. (1993) obtained just these results when they randomly assigned participants to either the happy or unhappy version of the question. In a replication, participants who were asked, “Are you introverted?” retrieved more memories of introverted behavior and concluded that they were more introverted than participants who were asked, “Are you extroverted?” A study investigating the limits on this effect revealed that it is contingent upon the person’s having a variable enough set of experiences that they can come up with examples to confirm either version of the question.

The studies we have just described demonstrate that selectively focusing on certain autobiographical memories can bias impressions of the self. Even when focusing on a specific event, certain aspects of that event may be more or less accessible, with resulting impact on impressions of the self. For example, people tend to recall details of their past selves and behaviors better than details of the situational context, and this affects people’s understanding of the causes for their own behavior (Moore, Sherrod, Liu, & Underwood, 1979). In one study, participants engaged in a get-acquainted conversation and immediately afterwards rated how much dispositional versus situational factors influenced their behavior.

The test of participants’ memories 3 weeks later revealed that their memory for situational details was markedly worse than their memory for details of their behavior. And, when asked to explain their past behavior participants attributed greater causal influence to dispositional factors than they had initially. Finally, participants’ dispositional attributions were negatively correlated with their recall for situational details. Thus, it seems that as information about subtle situational constraints fades from memory, people come to see their own behavior as more a reflection of their personality (Moore et al., 1979).

In addition to this finding that selectively focusing on one’s self in memory can lead to stronger dispositional inferences, other research demonstrates that which aspect of one’s past self is focused on—actions or internal experiences—also influences the extent to which people consider a past event to reveal information about their own personality. Andersen and Ross (1984) hypothesized that thoughts and feelings might be seen as more directly linked to the self than behaviors. Consistent with this hypothesis, they found that participants who retrieved memories of their thoughts and feelings rated these memories as more self-diagnostic than did participants who retrieved memories of past behaviors. Moreover, participants who recalled thoughts and feelings subsequently rated themselves more strongly on a list of traits, thus demonstrating that the particular aspects of an event that people focus on influences subsequent self-judgments.

A test of participants’ memories 3 weeks later revealed that their memory for situational details was markedly worse than their memory for details of their behavior. And, when asked to explain their past behavior participants attributed greater causal influence to dispositional factors than they had initially. Finally, participants’ dispositional attributions were negatively correlated with their recall for situational details. Thus, it seems that as information about subtle situational constraints fades from memory, people come to see their own behavior as more a reflection of their personality (Moore et al., 1979).

In addition to this finding that selectively focusing on one’s self in memory can lead to stronger dispositional inferences, other research demonstrates that which aspect of one’s past self is focused on—actions or internal experiences—also influences the extent to which people consider a past event to reveal information about their own personality. Andersen and Ross (1984) hypothesized that thoughts and feelings might be seen as more directly linked to the self than behaviors. Consistent with this hypothesis, they found that participants who retrieved memories of their thoughts and feelings rated these memories as more self-diagnostic than did participants who retrieved memories of past behaviors. Moreover, participants who recalled thoughts and feelings subsequently rated themselves more strongly on a list of traits, thus demonstrating that the particular aspects of an event that people focus on influences subsequent self-judgments.

The Self Reflects the Subjective Experience of Autobiographical Memory

We have seen how the content of memory influences the conclusions people draw about themselves. As we have already noted, the act of remembering also entails certain subjective experiences including the ease of recall, the vividness of the memory, feelings of reliving, and the visual perspective associated with any images. Next we will describe how these experiential cues impact the self-concept of the remembering person.

Ease of Recall Research by Schwarz et al. (1991) provides the most powerful demonstration that how people experience their memories can sometimes have a stronger effect on their self-concepts than the actual content of those memories. Participants were randomly assigned either to recall occasions on which they had behaved assertively or occasions on which they had behaved unassertively; further, it was specified that participants should recall either six or twelve examples of the behavior in question. After completing the recall task, participants rated their assertiveness. This design elegantly pits an experiential cue against memory content. Twelve examples of a given trait should suggest one possesses more of that trait than six examples should. However, recalling twelve examples is more difficult than recalling six examples is, and the more difficult it is to think of times when one behaved in a certain way, the less likely it is that one possesses the trait in question.

Participants’ self-ratings showed that their impressions of themselves were overwhelmingly influenced by how easy it was to complete the recall task: participants judged themselves to be more assertive the fewer examples of assertiveness
and the more examples of unassertiveness they were assigned to recall. Subsequent research using this paradigm has established that the inferences people make using the experiential cue are influenced by their theories about the meaning of this cue. For instance, participants told to recall twelve childhood memories rated their childhoods as happier than participants told to recall four childhood memories if the experimenter previously informed them that people have greater difficulty recalling events from happy periods of their lives. However, if participants were informed that people tend to have greater difficulty recalling unhappy periods the effect of the number of memories reversed (Winkielman & Schwarz, 2001).

Vividness Strack, Schwarz, and Gschneidinger (1985) manipulated the vividness of autobiographical memories by instructing participants to recall a given experience either in a pallid manner or vividly as if they were reliving it. The valence of the experience was also varied—either positive or negative. After recalling the experience in the specified manner, participants rated their general life satisfaction. Results showed that the mode of recall moderated the impact of positive and negative experiences on life satisfaction. In the vivid recall condition, participants who recalled positive experiences reported that they were generally more satisfied with their lives than did participants who recalled negative experiences. However, in the pallid recall condition, participants who recalled positive experiences reported that they were generally less satisfied with their lives than did participants who recalled negative experiences. This suggests that vivid remembering can cause people to assimilate the recalled event into their present assessments of their lives, whereas pallid remembering can cause the recalled event to be used as a point of contrast in assessing one's current life.

Subjective Temporal Distance How long ago a recalled event feels in time is another experiential aspect of memory that can determine whether people assimilate that event into their impressions of their current self or use it as a point of contrast against which to judge their present self. In a demonstration of this effect, Wilson (2000) found that undergraduates who were socially awkward in high school felt better about their present social skills when their socially awkward moments from high school were made to feel as if they were a long time ago than if they were made to feel recent. This finding suggests that the tendency we discussed earlier for people to subjectively distance negative past events in memory is an effective strategy for protecting the current self. This could explain why people who use this strategy more tend to have higher self-esteem (Ross & Wilson, 2002).

Memory Perspective Previously we described how aspects of the self influence whether people picture events in memory from their own first-person visual perspective or from an outside observer's third-person visual perspective. Other research demonstrates the implications that adopting one perspective or another can have on the self—specifically, on how people identify and explain their past behavior, as well as on the inferences they subsequently draw about themselves.

One of the most well-documented phenomena in attribution research is the tendency, when explaining an actor's behavior, for observers to attribute more causal influence to the actor than the actor herself does. Influential research by Storms (1973) established that this actor–observer asymmetry is promoted by the greater visual salience of the actor from the observer's point of view. This raises the question of whether visual perspective in memory imagery has a similar influence on the inferences that a person draws about the causes and implications of his or her own past behavior. To test this hypothesis Frank and Gilovich (1989) manipulated the memory perspective—first person or third person—participants used to picture an autobiographical memory. Participants then estimated the relative contribution of dispositional and situational factors as causes of their past behavior. As predicted, participants' understanding of their own past behavior became more dispositional when they pictured the memory from the third-person perspective than from the first-person perspective.

More recent research has shown that imagery perspective not only influences the relative salience of dispositions and situations in explaining one's own behavior, it also influences how people identify the behavior itself. Picturing doing an action (e.g., voting) from the third-person perspective leads people to define that action in terms of its broad meaning (e.g., "influencing the election"), whereas picturing doing that action from the first-person perspective leads people to define the action in terms of its concrete details (e.g., "marking a ballot") (Libby, 2003). For this reason, we expected that memory perspective would moderate the effect of autobiographical memories on the self. Specifically, the impact of a memory on the self should be more pronounced when it is pictured from the third-person perspective relative to the first-person perspective because the event should seem more meaningful from the third-person perspective.

We found evidence for this prediction in a series of studies that investigated the impact of autobiographical memories on perceptions of self-change (Libby, Eibach, & Gilovich, 2005). Participants who were told to recall an event that was related to a changed dimension of themselves thought they had changed more since that event occurred when they pictured it from the third-person perspective than when they pictured it from the first-person perspective. Participants told to recall an event that was related to a stable aspect of themselves thought they had changed less when recalling that event from the third-person than from the first-person perspective. The implications are particularly interesting in the case of people's memories for desirable and undesirable past behaviors. As suggested by Ross and Wilson's (2000) temporal self-appraisal theory, the motivation to self-enhance causes people to focus on how they have changed when they recall their own negative past actions, but on the stable aspects of themselves when they recall their own positive past actions. We have found that recalling events from the third-person perspective facilitates these motivated self-appraisals. For example, when undergraduates recalled a negative past behavior—a socially awkward moment from high school—they thought their social skills had improved more when they were told to picture the event from the third-person perspective than when they were told to picture it from the first-person perspective. Moreover, those told to recall from the third-person perspective even behaved in a more socially skilled manner during a subsequent interaction with a confederate. In another study participants were asked to recall a positive past
behavior—specifically, something they did that they were proud of. Those who were told to picture the event from the third-person perspective thought they had changed less than those who were told to picture it from the first-person perspective. Further, this effect was driven by individuals with high self-esteem—individuals who are particularly likely to look for continuity in themselves when thinking about positive past events (Libby et al., 2005). Together with the research on ease of retrieval, vividness, and subjective temporal distance, this research makes the point that the way people subjectively experience an event in memory can make a difference in terms of the conclusions they subsequently draw about themselves.

Thus, both the content and the experience of autobiographical memories can impact people’s notions of who they are. It would be misleading, though, to present this pattern of results without mention of an intriguing finding from the field of neuropsychology that challenges the idea that autobiographical memory is central to self-knowledge. Researchers have identified individuals who, as a result of traumatic brain injury, cannot recall any autobiographical events but can, nonetheless, report accurately on their personalities (Klein, Rozendal, & Cosmides, 2002; Tulving, 1993). Experimental studies with normal participants corroborated the notion that people do not routinely access autobiographical experiences when they provide abstract self-descriptions (Klein et al., 1992). How can such evidence be reconciled with the findings reviewed here? It may be that existing self-schemas provide a static representation of the self that can be used without reference to autobiographical memories, but that autobiographical memories are important particularly in building and updating self-schemas (cf. Klein & Loftus, 1993).

In the first half of the chapter we discussed how self-schemas are built through the process of organizing and explaining one’s own behavior on a particular dimension. An interesting pattern across research investigating the effect of memory on the self suggests that such organizing and explaining may be particularly likely when people reflect on their actions and experiences from a distance, focusing their thoughts on themselves. It is in these cases that memories have a particularly strong effect on people’s notions of who they are. For example, one reason that people’s attributions for their own behavior become more dispositional with times that their memories for situations fade relative to their memories for their own actions. In addition, people draw stronger inferences about themselves and aspects of their personalities when picturing past events from the removed, third-person observer’s standpoint. Thus, reflecting on the personal past in memory, especially from a distance, may be crucial in building self-schemas, and in updating existing self-schemas to incorporate new pieces of autobiographical knowledge.

This notion of self and memory as a dynamic system fits with conclusions drawn by other researchers of autobiographical memory. The point is especially well-made by Tessler and Nelson (1994), who propose:

As we described, people’s culturally defined notion of self, their beliefs about their own individual traits, and their motivation to protect desired self-images affect both what they recall from the personal past and how they subjectively experience those memories. In turn, both the content and subjective experience of autobiographical remembering have a significant impact on people’s understanding of their past behavior, the conclusions they subsequently draw about their own traits and characteristics, and their sense of change in themselves over time. We would thus revise Mill’s analogy and conclude that self and memory are less like two sides of the same coin and more like two voices harmonizing to produce a coherent articulation of self in time.

REFERENCES


