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Autobiographical Remembering and Cultural Memory in A Socio-Historical Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

It is widely acknowledged in psychology that self and autobiographical memory are linked. While previous studies have addressed the impact of culture on self-concept and autobiographical remembering, little has been said about the impact of socio-historical change within the same culture and the influence of national traumatic events such as World War II. The present study utilized a qualitative research methodology to analyze both the relationship between socio-historical change and the self-concept as expressed in autobiographical memory and the impact of war experiences on autobiographical remembering in Germany. The results reveal that autobiographical accounts reflect the continuing individualization postulated for the German culture as well as the impact of traumatic war experiences. The results are discussed with respect to the dialogical interplay between culture, self and memory.

Autobiographical remembering is a central part of the individual's sense of self (Ross, 1989). Both memory and self are constructed through forms of social interactions and/or cultural frameworks that lead to the formation of an autobiographical narrative (e.g. Fivush & Haden, 2003). Two main cultural frameworks that shape the self-concept are discussed in the literature: the model of independence and the model of interdependence (Kitayama, 2000; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). The model of independence prioritizes the perception of the individual as bounded and self-contained, focuses on mental states and personal qualities supporting self enhancement, self expression and self maximization. The model of interdependence prioritizes the perception of a fluidly defined individual as interrelated with others (co-agent), accepting norms and hierarchies, contributing to the harmonic functioning of the social unit, in particular the family (Greenfield, Keller, Fuligni, & Maynard, 2003; Keller, 2003).

THE INTERPLAY OF MEMORY, SELF AND CULTURE IN SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONTEXT

It has been suggested that autobiographical memory and self are interconnected meaning systems, constructed in macro- and micro-cultural contexts and thus represent two dynamic and interrelated aspects of the same overarching cultural system (Wang &

Brockmeier, 2002). Similarly, Valsiner (1991) focuses on the mutually constitutive and dialogical nature of person and culture. Conceptions of the self that prevail in a certain cultural group (macro-level) contribute to different genres of autobiographical memory for the people living in this group (micro-level). These autobiographical memories, in turn, reflect and further substantiate culture-specific conceptions of the selfhood. Thus, both autobiographical memory and self-concept contribute to a culture's continuity and transformation.

Empirical evidence for culture-typical genres of autobiographical memory has for example, been found by Wang (2001) in comparing earliest childhood memories among Euro-American and native Chinese college students. She found elaborated, specific, emotionally charged and self-focused memories in the Euro-American sample (a prototypical independent culture) whereas in the Chinese sample (a prototypical interdependent culture) the remembered narratives were brief, general, emotionally unexpressive, and relation-centered.

Building upon this approach, we conceive of autobiographical remembering not only as being subject to the dynamic interplay between memory, self and culture, but also to socio-historical changes over time within the *same* cultural context. Cross-cultural studies concerning the onset and content of autobiographical memories of adults have been mainly conducted with homogenous age segregated cohorts, living in the same historical time within different cultural environments. However, socio-cultural orientations change with historical times, so that historical comparisons also constitute cultural comparisons (Greenfield, 2004, 1997; Rogoff, 2003).

SOCIO-HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN GERMANY

An increasing trend towards individualization has been described at a societal level with assumed consequences for individual development with respect to the Western world (Kağitçibaşi, 1996, 2005) and in particular for Germany (Beck, 1986; Neubauer & Hurrelmann, 1995). Due to increases in the material standard of living, social and geographical mobility, and expansion of education since the 1950s, a different cultural environment in Germany has emerged (Beck, 1986). Sünker (1995, cf. Keller & Lamm, under review) argues that for today's children it is necessary to develop the ability to reflect on themselves and their world at the earliest possible stage. Moreover, the development of confidence is crucial and has become more strongly linked to the ability to take initiative and to "represent" oneself, as well as expressing one's wants and opinions. Individuality implies self determination, autonomy and self realization (Luhmann, 1987, cf. Keller & Lamm, under review) and thus independence. Accordingly, the external form and the internal pattern of relationships have significantly changed as a result of the individualization of the society (Bertram & Borrmann-Mueller, 1988; Nave-Herz, 1988, cf. Keller & Lamm, under review).

Recent empirical findings on socio-historical changes within Germany in terms of parental behavior support this view: Keller & Lamm (under review) for example compared mother's interactions with their 3 months old babies in two German cohorts (cohort 1: 1977/1978; cohort 2: 2000) and found significant differences that can be interpreted as the consequences of an increasing individualization: increase of face-to-face contingency and object play and decrease of bodily and facial/vocal warmth. This supports the view that cultural environments constitute dynamic systems that develop and change over historical time (Greenfield, 1997). With respect to autobiographical

remembering, these socio-historical changes should be reflected in the way autobiographical memories are recalled and expressed by different age groups. It can be assumed that today's student generation has developed an earlier and more embellished, emotional and focused autobiographical remembering than the generation of adults who have completed their first seven to eight years of life[1] before the 1950s.

THE IMPACT OF TRAUMATIC SOCIO-HISTORICAL EVENTS ON AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MEMORY

Prior to the 1950s, Germany was vastly affected by World War II and its consequences. In this paper, we also want to highlight the importance of such a traumatic historical event and its impact on autobiographical remembering. In autobiographical narratives of disabled war veterans (Lucius-Hoene, 1997) war events typically were reported as a mere sequence of deployment sites and troops movements without mention of personal meaning for the author of the narrative. The person only re-appeared in the context of injury as a passive victim of the war. It was only in post-war narratives of struggling to survive and in black market anecdotes that the self was constructed as an acting agent (p. 60).

Similarly, Pillemer (1998, p. 31) characterized traumatic events as having a "big bang" quality, in which "[...] the survivor's life is abruptly and violently altered." Traumatic events can have lasting emotional salience, so that their recollection years later can result in an emotional reliving of the event (Langer, 1991). Thorne and McLean (2003) found that one typical way of talking about memories of life-threatening events was to either give details on action but not to refer to emotion, especially pain (referred to as John Wayne positions) or to show concern for the feelings of others (referred to as Florence Nightingale position), but not to reveal one's own vulnerability by exposing their emotions during the event. They suggested that the reason was to be found in the social acceptance of these narrative styles.

If both autobiographical memory and self-concept contribute to a culture's continuity and transformation, and if autobiographical memory is fundamentally affected by traumatic events such as war, then we need to consider the impact of such events on the interplay between memory, self and culture. In the case of the German culture this implies that the socio-historical change of an increasing individualization of society (macro-level) should also be reflected in the conceptions of selfhood as expressed in autobiographical remembering (micro-level). On the other hand, traumatic socio-historical events like World War II will also have an effect on autobiographical remembering. If we follow the above reasoning, this will also have an impact on the self-concept of the individual who experienced the traumatic event and ultimately on the cultural practices, symbols and artifacts of a society. Thorne and McLean (2003) for example, contend that "... if traumatic events are so potent for individuals, they should also be important for the culture at large" (p. 174).

ASPECTS OF THE SELF-CONCEPT IN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MEMORY

One crucial aspect of the self-concept expressed in autobiographical remembering is reflected in the way the narrator constructs his or her personal possibilities for activity

and action initiative (agency) in regard to the reported life events (Bamberg, 1999). Does the narrator conceive of him- or herself as an actively acting person, as the center of the life events, as the one who is in control of his or her own life and who has the freedom to take decisions autonomously, or does he conceive of him- or herself as directed by heteronomous powers (cf. Bruner, 1994; McAdams, 1993, pp 282-287). It should be noted here that the above authors do not explicitly refer to the models of interdependence and independence in this context but use the terms autonomy and heteronomy in a more general sense and on an individual level of the narrator. An autobiographical account may thus be construed as simple sequence of contingent events, as mere befalling, as result of interfering powerful others or as anonymous fate (cf. Schütze, 1981; Straub, 1999, pp. 41-43). In contrast, it may as well be construed as a sequence of autonomous action, decisions and initiatives (Lucius-Hoene & Deppermann, 2002). Both styles may be found in one and the same autobiographical account but the prevailing style can be regarded as reflecting central aspects of a person's self-concept as expressed in autobiographical remembering.

Another crucial aspect of the self-concept in narratives is described as "positioning of the self" (Lucius-Hoene & Deppermann , 2002, see also Langenhove & Harré, 1999). The way the narrator positions him- or herself within the social space of interaction has been described in the literature as a fundamental form of constructing and negotiating identities. Positioning within a social interaction may comprise personal, role or moral attributes of a narrator (Langenhove & Harré, 1999). It is our understanding that a positioning of the self, e.g. in terms of personal attributes or motives, prototypically accounts for an independent self-concept, whereas the positioning of the other prototypically accounts for an interdependent self-concept. A missing positioning, i.e. the narrator him- or herself does not appear in the remembered account at all, may be linked to the emotional distance the narrator holds to the memory due to the traumatic nature of the experience.

With regard to the increasing individualization in the German society on the one hand and the impact of socio-historical traumatic events on the other hand, we would therefore assume that younger Germans' autobiographical memories are construed differently than those of older Germans and that memories of war-related events are reported differently than those not related to war. In order to gain a better understanding of the dynamics of *how* these memories are construed, we followed an open research approach in our study as suggested by the qualitative paradigm (Wilson, 1973).

A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH APPROACH

This paper is based on a qualitative study on autobiographical memory. Special attention is given to the self-concept in a cultural context undergoing socio-historical changes on the one hand, and the impact of traumatic war experiences on autobiographical remembering on the other hand. We draw on data that was collected within a larger research context by means of a questionnaire as well as some open-ended questions. In the present paper, we focus on results from the answers to two of the open-ended questions. Participants were asked to take a moment to think of their earliest childhood memory and to describe it as precisely as they could. They were told that it should be their own memory and not something that they had been told or had seen in a picture. They were then asked to describe how they felt during the remembered experience as precisely as they could.

Participants

Participants were 39 German students from the University of Osnabrueck and 40 older participants who had all completed a university education. The high educational level of the older adults was chosen to control for the fairly high educational level of the student sample. The criterion for the older cohort was that they had completed the first 7 years of life by the year 1950. Therefore they were between the ages of 58 to 66 at the time of data collection. The students were recruited in introductory psychology classes. The participants of the older cohort were recruited through personal contacts and senior citizen clubs. In both groups, participation was voluntary and based on informed consent.

Data Analysis

The written accounts were analyzed using a qualitative inductive methodology supported by the software program Atlas.ti. Borrowing from a discourse analysis approach, the data were coded by the first and second authors simultaneously and then systematically compared. The accounts were analyzed with respect to how participants describe their remembering (narrative style) and what they described (content). Special attention was given to indicators accounting for an interdependent or independent self-concept, respectively.

RESULTS

Data summary

Overall, the accounts tended to be relatively brief and less elaborated than expected and, with few exceptions, included the closer social environment such as parents, grandparents, siblings, other relatives, neighbours and other children, sometimes even animals. However, the way reference is made to these other persons varied between cohorts.

Younger cohort

Participants in the younger cohort tended to refer to themselves as actively and autonomously acting persons, taking decisions and initiatives. Self-initiative was typically reported with regard to toys, own preferences and intentions (agency). They referred to their own emotions, attitudes and volition (self-positioning). In their accounts, attachment figures such as parents were referred to either in a neutral way (mein Vater "my father", meine Mutter "my mother") or in a very personal way (Papa "Dad", Mama "mom"). The reported events were often clear single events; in some other cases it is not clear whether the reported event was a single or a regular event. The following excerpts serve as illustrations:

Example 1²:
>   Description of the first memory:
>   *"I was about ~ 6 years of age. My sister was still an infant and cried all the time. Mom had to do the laundry and told me to take care of my sister. My dad was not present. I was rocking the buggy in order to calm her but she only cried even more. I rocked even more until the baby carrier felt over with my sister underneath. I got afraid mom and dad could be mad at me and I hid under the bathtub."* (Participant 7)
>   Description of the emotion felt at the remembered event:
>   *"I was afraid mom could be mad at me and would tell dad when he is home. I was afraid dad would spank me and make me stand in the corner."*

Example 2:
>   Description of the first memory:
>   *"I don't know whether it is the 1. memory, in any case it is an early one! It was an embarrassing experience: (family) celebration with visitors at my grandmother's house. I wanted to demonstrate that I was able to recognize my father blindly and everybody was supposed to stand in a circle. Then I covered my eyes, turned around and looked through my fingers, of course. My plan was to recognize my father by his shoes, but unfortunately a 2nd guest wore the same pair of shoes and I did not run into the arms of my father"* (Participant 31)
>   Description of the emotion felt at the remembered event:
>   *"I wanted to proudly demonstrate something and then I was rather embarrassed and disappointed by myself. I was angry."*

Both examples demonstrate a fluent and elaborated writing style and refer to a specific event. The author of the memory appeared as an acting self and as the center of the remembered event. Other persons appeared not as main actors but remained in the background. The main actor in the scene is the remembering author. The event was described in terms of own personal motives and intentions. In the first example, a very personal approach is used to refer to the parents (*Mama* "mom", *Papa* "dad"). In both cases, the narrators referred directly to their emotions. The self was thus clearly positioned in the social space and appeared bounded and self-focused, i.e. distinct from the other persons.

Older Cohort

The participants in the older cohort tended to refer to themselves as part of a larger group ("we-referral"). They reported self-initiative as well, however, with regard to being obedient, carrying out one's duties and taking on responsibility. Toys and play behavior hardly appeared in their accounts.. When referring to their own emotions, they tended to report on their cognitions and bodily feelings rather then to the actual emotion felt. In their accounts, attachment figures like the parents were referred to either in a neutral way (*mein Vater* "my father", *meine Mutter* "my mother") or in a very distant way (*Der Vater* "the father", *die Eltern* "the parents") that seemed to refer to social roles more than to the personal relationship the narrator held with these persons. The remembered events were typically reported in such a way that it was not clear whether it was a single or a recurring event.

Example 3

Description of the first memory:

"When we had company it could happen that I was called into the midst of the guests and asked 'Sag mal Fuchs!' ['say fox!']. Obediently and innocently I said: 'Futz' [mispronounced] Thereupon everybody laughed and smiled benignly. One day I compared by myself the demanded word with my answer and realized my speech disorder. Then I was ashamed of myself." (Participant 63)

Description of the emotion felt at the remembered event:

"First I was ashamed and angry with myself. Then I became aware that I had grown a bit older and that this would not happen to me again. At the next occasion I could spoil the adult's party"

Example 4

Description of the first memory:

"We lived in a farming community in Münsterland. My 3y. older brother and I were sent to a coal merchant (3km away) with a pushcart in order to fetch [low quality] coal. Back home, we had to pick out the firm chunks and throw them into the coal scuttle. Sometimes I found pieces with fool's gold. Those I collected like a treasure". (Participant 64)

Description of the emotion felt at the remembered event:

"I usually carried out the many duties that we children had with this brother. I felt secure with him and could rely on him. The 'long' way to the coal merchant was like an adventure to me."

Both authors referred to themselves as part of a larger group ("we"). The initiation of action is partly ascribed to the other persons (example 3) or to a heteronymous power ("we were sent", example 4) i.e. not the narrator but someone else has the control of the action. In both cases, the narrator only reacted in an obedient manner. Self-initiative ("collecting fool's gold") is not related to own intentions and preferences. When referring to his own emotions, the narrator of example 4 reported on his cognitions and actions (fulfilling duties) only, rather then to the actual emotion felt. In example 3 other persons are referred to in terms the social roles ("visitors", "the adults") more than to the personal relationship the narrator held with these persons, while in example 4 other persons do not appear directly in the account at all. The remembered event in example 4 seems not to have been a single event but there are no indications of it having been a regular event either. In example 3 the narrative is introduced by saying "it could happen" which seems to point to some repetitiveness but then a singular event is contrasted with this.

As expected many (app. 40%) of the older cohort's earliest memories referred to war-related events. These were typically reported in a very telegraphic style. Events were often simply listed in the form of single words or sentence fragments; the account appeared factual and neutral and seemed to contrast with the emotions that would be expected in the described situations. The authors seemed to be split off from their emotions and distant from the reported event. Often, they were not able to recall any of the emotion felt during this experience. Sometimes the person did not appear at all in the account (missing positioning) or the memory was described like a pictorial impression. The fathers, who tended to be absent as soldiers, were often described as

foreigners without personal relationship to the narrating self. Following are three examples in which participants reported about events related to the war:

Example 5
> Description of the first memory:
> *"2. Jan. 19945 – air attack on Nbg – time in the bomb basement – fear of the people – hitting demolition bombs – then all-clear – in the dark through the city with brother in buggy – some place at a foreign family's home over night – next day back to the Hans– Sachs– Place – smoking ruins – apartment burnt – ruins everywhere, smoke, duds, 'Stabbrand-bombs' – then trip to Weizenheim to relatives."* (Participant 9)
> Description of the emotion felt at the remembered event:
> *"Full of fear and at the same time curious – it is not possible to recall exactly what I felt at that time."*

Example 6
> Description of the first memory:
> *"- security = bed of the mother/ parents days and nights of bombs – in the infant carrier = basement when bomb attacks by then hostile airplanes"* (Participant 57)
> Description of the emotion felt at the remembered event:
> *"not possible (any more): proud of brothers, who went searching for splints after bomb fire…"*

Example 7
> Description of the first memory:
> *"Evacuatin, bomb attacks, low-flying plane attack"* (Participant 57)
> Description of the emotion felt at the remembered event:
> *"fear"*

Typically, the war-related memories were not constructed in form of a narrative. Instead the single events were listed without being connected verbally by the participants. The authors did not appear as acting individuals; nor did any other person seem to be an actor in the described scene. Others were referred to indirectly (e. g., "low flying plane", "in the dark through the city with brother") or as anonymous supernumeraries (e. g. "the people", "a foreign family"). There seemed to be no personal relationship to the other persons. They were referred to as "the mother/parents", "brother(s)", "the father" and "the foreign man". Emotions either cannot be remembered or reported in a telegraphic style.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The findings from this study revealed that there were intra-cultural variations in adults' re-collections of earliest childhood memories within the German culture that accord with different conceptions of the self. Younger respondents showed a greater tendency to express individual preferences or self-determination in their memory accounts; they positioned themselves within the reported memory and appeared as the main actor; they used a personalized style in referring to other close persons and

referred to single events. Overall, their accounts were more elaborated and emotions were in most cases clearly referred to. Older respondents, in contrast, showed a greater concern with obedience and responsibility; they tended to position themselves in the context of a social group or not at all. They used a more distant style in referring to close attachment figures. They did not clearly refer to single or routine events but used a narrative style that did not permit a clear determination of whether the reported event happened only once or on a repeated basis. Memories of the war were reported in a telegraphic style and emotions related to these memories usually not remembered.

The findings presented in this paper lead us to suggest that autobiographical reports not only accord with different conceptions of selfhood but also that the conception of the self is in a dynamic relationship with socio-cultural changes within that cultural framework. Moreover, traumatizing experiences crucially affect the way an individual remembers these experiences. Barclay (1996) e.g. states that traumatic experience can hurt the system of Self rendering people incapable of organizing and reconstructiong their experience. Therefore individuals who suffer from a psychological trauma find it difficult to share it with others through language. Smorti et al. (in press) found that autobiographical accounts of collectively experienced trauma use a different narrative genre than those of individually experienced trauma. For example, while in both genres, the self appears as rather passive and subject to external forces, narrative accounts of collective trauma resemble a "historical reconstruction of the event, where time and space are well detailed" and "in which the main character is the community" (p.14). Traumatic historical events like World War II therefore may be seen as a special interfering factor that had a major impact on autobiographical remembering. Drawing on the model proposed by Wang and Brockmeier (2002), we would like to add these aspects to their theoretical framework and suggest that socio-historical changes as well as historical traumatic events are crucially involved in the dialectical interplay between culture, self and autobiographical memory (see Figure 1 for illustration).

Our model supports the view that culture is both transforming and is transformed by autobiographical remembering and the concept of selfhood. We presume autobiographical remembering that has been fundamentally affected by traumatic events on a cultural level will in turn influence the self-concept (micro-cultural level) and the prevailing cultural context (macro-cultural level). How much of the difference between the cohorts is due to the traumatic war-related experiences of the older adults or the increasing individualization in Germany is difficult to answer. However, some differences were observable between the younger adults' memories and the older adults who did not mention events that were directly related to war (or other traumatic) experiences. A comparative sample from a neighboring country that was less affected by the war (e. g. Switzerland) could shed light on this question.

Short and less elaborated answers might in part be due to the questionnaire format of data collection. Accounts of autobiographical memories might reveal more information if orally told to another person rather than merely written on paper within limited space. Thorne and McLean (2003) have pointed out that interlocutors often demand meanings and insist on knowing why the speaker is telling them the story. When telling a memory in the form of a story to another person, the speaker is naturally forced to follow the "rules" of narration, i.e. it has a clear beginning, an end, a peak, and follows a certain goal that should become clear in the stream of the story. Further research using such techniques might contribute to our further understanding of autobiographical memory in cultural and socio-historical context.
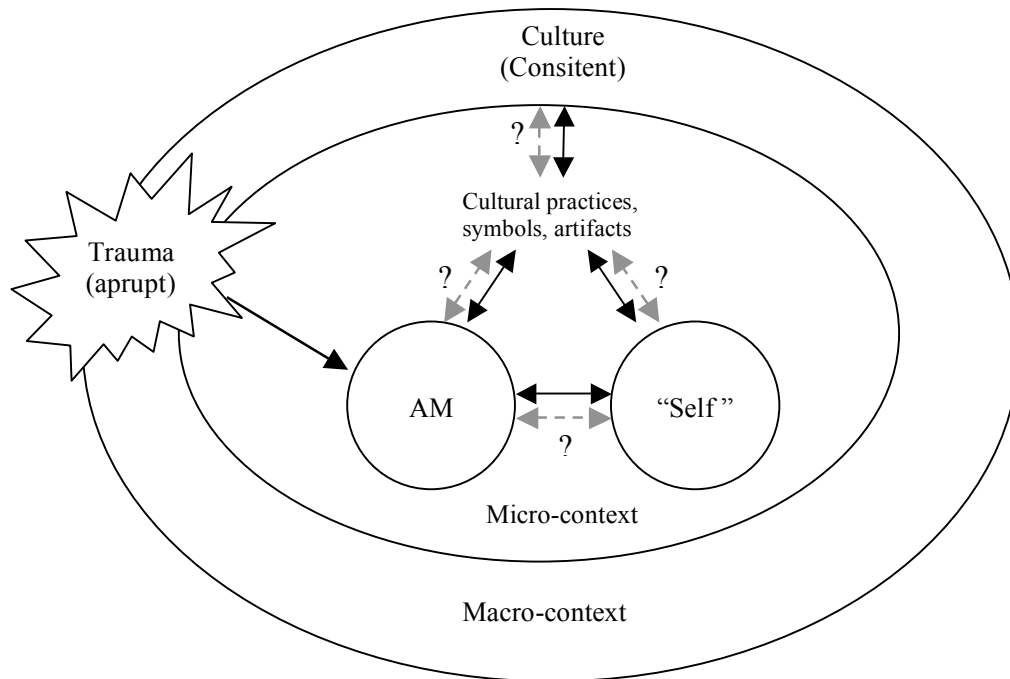
Figure 1
**Interplay between Autobiographical Memory (AM), Self, Culture and the Impact
of Trauma**

Also, it is not entirely clear how much of the autobiographical recall differences between the older and younger cohort are due to societal norms and standards at the time the self was formed (early childhood) and how much of the differences might be due to age-related ways of remembering. Longitudinal studies would be necessary to explore how autobiographical remembering changes over the lifespan and to explore the possibility of age-related cognitive patterns of autobiographical memory functioning.

The cohort effects might also partly be explained by the fact that the remembered event is much more current for the younger cohort than for the older cohort. This might be the reason why the event is remembered more vividly than in the older cohort. Also, since the remembered event (and thus the socio-cultural context at the time) is closer to the present socio-cultural context for the younger participants, they might be more culturally attuned to these memories than participants of the older cohort. Further studies comparing younger and older cohorts at various stages of age could shed further light on this subject.

NOTES

[1.] It can be assumed that the transition between childhood amnesia and autobiographical memory has been mastered by the age of 7 to 8 years (Bruce, Dolan, & Phillips-Grant, 2000; Pillemer & White, 1989).

[2.] For the German originals of the examples please contact the authors.

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