The psychological distance of memories: Examining causal relations with mood and self-esteem in young, middle-aged and older adults

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ABSTRACT

Three studies examined the self-enhancement function of autobiographical memory (measured with subjective temporal distance of memories). Participants recalled a memory of an attained and a failed goal and rated the subjective distance between each memory and the present. Study 1 showed that young adults with higher self-esteem felt closer to memories of attained goals and farther from failure memories than those with lower self-esteem. In Study 2, young, middle-aged and older adults with higher self-esteem felt closer to success memories, whereas self-esteem was unrelated to the temporal distance of failure memories. In both studies, feeling closer to success memories (and far from failure) led to enhanced mood. In Study 3, state self-esteem was experimentally manipulated. The manipulation had no effect on young and older adults, but middle-aged adults whose self-esteem was decreased, felt closer to success memories than failure memories. Results are discussed in relation to the temporal self-appraisal theory.

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1. Introduction

Some memories of events that happened years ago feel like yesterday, whereas other events that took place only months ago seem like a decade away. What determines the subjective temporal closeness of autobiographical memories? The subjective temporal distance of an autobiographical memory refers to the extent to which it feels near or distant in time (Van Boven, Kane, McGraw, & Dale, 2010). Previous research suggests that people tend to perceive their positive memories or past successes as psychologically closer than their negative memories or past failures, even when their actual temporal distance is similar (Wilson & Ross, 2001, 2003). According to the temporal self-appraisal theory, one function of autobiographical memories is self-enhancement through psychologically distancing negative memories and feeling closer to positive memories (Wilson & Ross, 2001). The current paper investigates, in three studies, the subjective temporal distance of memories of success or failure in the pursuit of personal goals.

Unlike previous work (e.g., Wilson & Ross, 2001) which tested the temporal self-appraisal theory by focusing mostly on "past selves" (e.g., your high school self) and rarely on specific autobiographical memories (e.g., embarrassing or proud experience), the current studies focused on memories of personally meaningful past goals. The reason we focused on goals was...
that autobiographical memories are theorized to be the products of a self-memory system (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000) that is directed and coordinated by the goals of the rememberer. Furthermore, goal attainment (or failure) contributes strongly to positive (or negative) self-appraisals (e.g., Bandura & Cervone, 1983, 1986). Thus, we broadened the repertoire of the temporal self-appraisal theory by focusing on specific autobiographical memories, which are particularly associated with one’s goals. We examined both social goals (e.g., finding a decent partner) and personal achievement goals (e.g., defending one’s thesis successfully) within each study. Previous studies on the self-appraisal theory have focused on either the social domain (e.g., Cortes & Wilson, 2016; Haynes et al., 2007; Lu & Chang, 2009; Wakimoto, 2011) or the personal achievement domain (e.g., Peetz, Wilson, & Strahan, 2009) separately. There are a few papers that included both domains, however never in comparison to each other within the same specific study (e.g., Libby, Valenti, Pfent, & Eibach, 2011; Ross & Wilson, 2002). Therefore, we compared memories of social versus achievement goals within each study. Based on general findings from the literature, we expected them to serve the self-enhancement function in a similar fashion.

More specifically, the first research aim is to re-test the well-supported hypothesis of a positive association between self-esteem and the self-enhancement function of autobiographical memory. Based on previous findings (e.g., Peetz & Wilson, 2008) we expect higher self-esteem to be associated with feeling psychologically closer to memories of attained goals (in comparison to memories of failed goals). The second aim is to explore age-related differences in the self-enhancement function of autobiographical memory: We explored whether the function of autobiographical memories related to self-enhancement increases or decreases across adulthood. The third research aim is to examine whether self-enhancement has a direct impact on mood. Does feeling closer to memories of attained goals (compared to memories of failed goals) lead to better mood? This question has never been investigated before. Finally, the fourth research aim is to test whether, for the first time in the literature, self-esteem has a causal impact on the subjective temporal distance of memories and, thereby, on self-enhancement. In sum, the current research investigates the role of people’s self-esteem and age in the subjective temporal distance of their memories of attained (vs. failed) goals, and examines change in mood as an outcome of this self-enhancement function.²

1.1. Functional approach to autobiographical memory

Adults’ sense of self or identity greatly depends on the memories of their life experiences (Wilson & Ross, 2003). As is true for all memories, autobiographical memories are not stored in the brain as holistic and static representations (self-memory system model of autobiographical memory; Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000), but are (re-)constructed at retrieval from abstract representations of past experiences in accordance with the current goals and needs of the rememberer (Bluck, Alea, & Demiray, 2010). Autobiographical memories are functional and closely associated with personal goal pursuit (Bluck et al., 2010; Pillemer, 2003; Webster, 2003). According to the tripartite model of functions, there are three major psychosocial functions of autobiographical remembering: (1) maintaining a sense of self/identity and a positive self-esteem, (2) social bonding, and (3) directing current and future behaviors (Bluck, Alea, Habermas, & Rubin, 2005; Demiray & Freund, 2015; Hyman & Faries, 1992).

1.1.1. Self-enhancement function

The present research focuses on the self-enhancement function of autobiographical memories. Temporal self-appraisal theory (Wilson & Ross, 2001, 2003) posits that the subjective temporal distance between their memories and the present serves the function of self-enhancement. By perceiving a past achievement or a positive experience as subjectively recent, people can continue to take credit for that success and thereby feel good about themselves in the present. In contrast, by perceiving a past shortcoming or a negative experience as subjectively distant, people can lessen the association of the failure or negative experience with their self-concept and, thereby, lower its impact on their current self-esteem (Peetz & Wilson, 2008). A number of studies have shown that people systematically shift their subjective estimates of the passage of time for self-enhancement purposes (Ross & Wilson, 2002; Wilson & Ross, 2001).

There are some correlational studies showing a significant link between higher self-esteem and self-enhancement tendencies. Previous work has shown that people with high self-esteem tend to engage in cognitive strategies that serve to maintain or enhance self-regard (Baumeister, 1998; Blaine & Crocker, 1993; Mussweiler, Gabriel, & Bodenhausen, 2000). Ross and Wilson (2002) supported these findings by showing that students with higher self-esteem judged past experiences with unfavorable implications for their current self-esteem as more psychologically distant than experiences with favorable implications. In contrast, those with lower self-esteem reported no significant difference in the subjective temporal distance of positive and negative experiences. Similar to Ross and Wilson (2002), the current studies examined the relation between self-esteem and people’s subjective temporal distance to their memories. Moving beyond correlational designs, however, we experimentally manipulated self-esteem and examined its causal impact on subjective temporal distance. To our knowledge, there is no previous work that examines the effect of experimentally manipulated self-esteem on how temporally close or distant memories of success or failure in reaching one’s goals are perceived. This empirical approach allows testing whether self-esteem is causally related to the self-enhancement function of autobiographical memory.

² For brevity reasons, the major variable of interest “subjective temporal distance” is shortened as “temporal distance” throughout the manuscript. Every reference to “actual temporal distance” is specified as “actual temporal distance”.


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