



Autobiographical memory and well-being in aging: The central role of semantic self-images



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ABSTRACT

Higher levels of well-being are associated with longer life expectancies and better physical health. Previous studies suggest that processes involving the self and autobiographical memory are related to well-being, yet these relationships are poorly understood. The present study tested 32 older and 32 younger adults using scales measuring well-being and the affective valence of two types of autobiographical memory: episodic autobiographical memories and semantic self-images. Results showed that valence of semantic self-images, but not episodic autobiographical memories, was highly correlated with well-being, particularly in older adults. In contrast, well-being in older adults was unrelated to performance across a range of standardised memory tasks. These results highlight the role of semantic self-images in well-being, and have implications for the development of therapeutic interventions for well-being in aging.

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1. Introduction

The way we remember our past is thought to influence both our sense of self and our general well-being. However, the mechanisms underpinning the links between memory, self and well-being are little understood. This study aimed to investigate the relationships between well-being and two types of autobiographical memory: semantic self-images (e.g., autobiographical knowledge about the self, comprising traits, family roles and group-membership) and episodic autobiographical memories (detailed memories of specific, personally-experienced events). Furthermore, in light of established age-related changes in memory function (e.g., Levine, Svoboda, Hay, & Winocur, 2002; Piolino, Desgranges, Benali, & Eustache, 2002), we tested younger and older adult groups in order to examine whether these relationships differ between age groups. A better understanding of the role that different types of memory play in well-being has important implications. People with higher levels of well-being benefit from more than simply positive mood and good social relationships (Diener, 2013), they also have increased life expectancies and better physical health (Diener & Chan, 2011; Kok et al., 2013). Crucially, this study took the novel approach of comparing the roles of semantic and episodic autobiographical memory, addressing the recent call for more detailed investigation of the function of semantic components of autobiographical memory (e.g., Haslam, Jetten, Haslam, Pugliese, & Tonks, 2011; Prebble, Addis, & Tippett, 2013; Thomsen, 2009).

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Traditionally, the main focus of autobiographical memory research has been on episodic, rather than semantic, memories (see [Thomsen, 2009](#)). Episodic autobiographical memories relate to a specific moment in time and typically include sensory-perceptual details (e.g., visual imagery and sensory information) and are characterised by a sense of ‘mental time travel’ ([Tulving, 1983, 2002](#)). In contrast, semantic autobiographical memories involve simply knowing about an event or fact, without a sense of mentally travelling back and re-living a specific event ([Tulving, 1983, 2002](#)). These semantic autobiographical memories include knowing the locations of countries visited on holiday and names of family members. They also include the sets of traits, roles and beliefs that form semantic self-images, such as knowing one is a retired accountant and a mother of two children. Semantic self-images are thus a particularly self-relevant subsection of semantic autobiographical memory. Research suggests that as we get older, sensory-specific episodic memories become less accessible, whilst semantic autobiographical memories are retained (e.g., [Levine et al., 2002](#); [Piolino et al., 2002](#)).

Specific episodic autobiographical memories arguably play a range of important roles, including promoting social intimacy ([Pillemer, 1998](#)), acting as landmark events marking transitions in the life story ([Shum, 1998](#); [Thomsen, Pillemer, & Ivcevic, 2011](#)), and engaging people with their long-term goals ([Singer & Salovey, 1993](#)). However, recent work (e.g., [Haslam et al., 2011](#); [Thomsen, 2009](#)) has emphasised the important role of semantic autobiographical memory. Key to the present study, [Piolino et al. \(2006\)](#) proposed that the retention of semantic autobiographical memories may play a central role in enabling older adults to maintain a sense of diachronic unity. [Haslam et al. \(2011\)](#) suggest semantic self-knowledge is a bi-directional mediator between episodic autobiographical memory and identity. They proposed that episodic autobiographical memories provide the basis for semantic autobiographical memories, and it is these semantic “facts” that support the self.

[Prebble et al. \(2013\)](#) developed this idea further, proposing that semantic autobiographical memories may help form a scaffold for both episodic recollection and imagination of future events (e.g., [Irish, Addis, Hodges, & Piguet, 2012](#)). [Prebble et al.](#) suggest that self-continuity in older adults is maintained by semantic autobiographical memory. Semantic autobiographical memories may provide a more efficient means of promoting narrative continuity, possibly by virtue of the fact that they can be used to synthesise and organise large amounts of information into a coherent life story ([Prebble et al., 2013](#)). In support of this organisational account, [Thomsen \(2009\)](#); [Thomsen et al., 2011](#)) proposed that people use semanticised life story chapters (e.g., time at university X) to organise autobiographical retrieval and shape a narrative life story. Semantic facts structure the way we remember the past and also the way children imagine the future ([Bohn & Berntsen, 2011](#)). In short, a growing number of researchers have emphasised the role that semantic autobiographical memory plays in organising memory and promoting a coherent sense of self.

Semantic autobiographical memory is the most resilient form of autobiographical memory, preferentially preserved in healthy aging ([Levine et al., 2002](#); [Piolino et al., 2002](#)) retrograde amnesia ([Klein & Lax, 2010](#); [Rathbone, Moulin, & Conway, 2009](#)), depression ([Dalgleish et al., 2007](#)), autism ([Crane & Goddard, 2008](#)) and Alzheimer’s disease ([Martinelli, Anssens, Sperduti, & Piolino, 2013](#)). In addition to highlighting the dissociation between episodic and semantic memory, these studies also raise the possibility that semantic self-images might be a useful starting point for rehabilitation in a range of clinical groups. The present study was particularly focused on the emotional valence of semantic self-images and episodic autobiographical memories. This is because there are established age-related changes in the emotional ratings of autobiographical memory (e.g. the positivity effect; [Kennedy, Mather, & Carstensen, 2004](#)), but little is known about how these might relate to well-being.

Well-being can be conceptualised at both the eudaimonic and hedonic level. Eudaimonic well-being is associated with viewing one’s life with meaning, purpose and a sense of growth ([Bauer, McAdams, & Pals, 2008](#)) and using and developing the best aspects of oneself ([Huta & Ryan, 2010](#)). Eudaimonic well-being is often conceptualised as “psychological well-being” (e.g. [Ryff & Keyes, 1995](#)), although other conceptualisations exist (for a review, see [Huta, 2013](#)). Hedonic well-being focuses on both the experience of pleasure and a more cognitive evaluation of life satisfaction ([Diener, 2013](#)). Recent empirical work suggests that hedonic and eudaimonic well-being may overlap, with greatest overall well-being perhaps stemming from the pursuit of both hedonic and eudaimonic aims ([Huta & Ryan, 2010](#)).

We suggest that semantic self-images play a crucial role in supporting the self. The present study aimed to explore the role of semantic self-images in well-being in aging, and centred on three main research questions, which will be explored in detail below: (1) How does the emotional valence of episodic autobiographical memories and semantic self-images differ between younger and older adults; (2) is well-being correlated more strongly with the valence of semantic self-images or episodic autobiographical memories and does this differ between younger and older adults; (3) in older adults, is the valence of semantic self-images more strongly correlated with well-being than objective measures of memory performance.

The first research question focused on the phenomenological ratings of episodic autobiographical memories and semantic self-images in the two age groups. Older adults tend to rate their episodic autobiographical memories more positively than younger adults (the “positivity effect”; [Kennedy et al., 2004](#); [Schlagman, Schulz, & Kvavilashvili, 2006](#); [Schryer, Ross, St-Jaques, Levine, & Fernandes, 2012](#)). Compared to younger adults, older adults tend to reappraise negative memories in a more positive light ([Comblain, D’Argembeau, & Van der Linden, 2005](#)) and report a larger proportion of positive than negative autobiographical memories (e.g., [Mather & Carstensen, 2005](#)). The first prediction, in line with the positivity effect (e.g., [Kennedy et al., 2004](#)), was that older adults would rate both their semantic self-images and episodic autobiographical memories more positively than younger adults.

The second research question centred on the relationships between well-being and the emotional valence of episodic autobiographical memories, and semantic self-images. In particular, it aimed to elucidate the role that semantic self-images play in well-being. [Swann and Buhrmester \(2012\)](#) suggest that stable self-representations are vital for social interactions, making goals, and enabling a sense of belonging. The present study sought to ascertain whether the valence of semantic

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