



## Metamemory appraisals in autobiographical event recall



Alan Scoboria<sup>a,\*</sup>, Jennifer M. Talarico<sup>b</sup>, Lisa Pascal<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Psychology, University of Windsor, Ontario, Canada

<sup>b</sup> Department of Psychology, Lafayette College, Easton, PA, United States

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### ABSTRACT

Two studies examined whether belief in the occurrence of events, recollecting events, and belief in the accuracy of recollections are distinct aspects of autobiographical remembering. In Study 1, 299 student participants received a cue to recall five childhood events, after which they rated each event on these constructs and other characteristics associated with remembering. Structural equation modelling revealed that variance in ratings was best explained by the three anticipated latent variables. In Study 2, an online sample of 1026 adults recalled and rated a childhood event and an event about which they were somehow uncertain. Confirmatory modelling replicated the three latent variables. The relationship of key predictors (perceptual detail, spatial detail, re-experiencing, and event plausibility) to the latent variables confirmed the distinction. These studies demonstrate that belief in occurrence and belief in accuracy appraisals are distinct, the former indexing the truth status of the event and the latter the degree to which the event representation accurately reflects prior experience. Further, they suggest that belief in accuracy indexes the monitoring of the quality of recollections.

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### 1. Introduction

For at least the past half-century, researchers have done an admirable job of describing the phenomenology of autobiographical memory (AM). Features of remembering like vividness and visual perspective are well described. Further work has examined how these properties are influenced by event features (e.g., emotion or time since occurrence) or by cognitive processes (e.g., imagination). Yet, [Baddeley \(2012\)](#) recently encouraged researchers in the area to integrate such diverse topics into broader theoretical understandings. Some theoretical and empirical efforts to integrate these individual findings into a more complete picture of AM processing have been made ([Conway, Singer, & Tagini, 2004](#); [Rubin, 2006](#)). Importantly,

integration must be done with a clear understanding of the dissociable constructs that contribute to the experience of remembering events.

In this work, we continue this line of inquiry via discussion of three concepts developed in prior work which have yet to be simultaneously disentangled. This paper examines the degree to which believing that events occurred (*autobiographical belief*), recollecting events (*recollection*), and appraising the accuracy of recollections (*belief in accuracy*) are distinct components of remembering.

Before discussing these concepts, we emphasize that our focus is not on the objective accuracy of memories. With autobiographical remembering, the objective details of events as originally experienced are not available for verification in the same way that an investigator can ascertain the accuracy of recall of a word presented on a list earlier in an experimental session. Even in cases where photographs or diaries exist to corroborate past events, memories remain subjective appraisals that are based on

\* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, University of Windsor, 401 Sunset, Windsor, Ontario N9B 3P4, Canada. Tel.: +1 519 253 3000x4090.

E-mail address: [scoboria@uwindsor.ca](mailto:scoboria@uwindsor.ca) (A. Scoboria).

the information available at the time of remembering. When external evidence challenges a memory, an individual may choose to doubt the evidence as readily as changing his or her belief in the accuracy of the memory.

The availability of ‘objective’ information is only part of the problem of assessing accuracy in autobiographical memory. Real-world events include a staggering amount of multimodal information experienced over relatively lengthy time spans. To expect complete and accurate retrieval of all of this information seems an unreasonable standard for accuracy. Even if one were theoretically able to remember all of the details of a prior event, how this information is reported becomes a problem. There are systematic influences of linguistic and narrative conventions on free recall, and there are limitations of expression for perceptual and emotional experiences. Characteristics of the retrieval environment influence the type and amount of information that is reported, such that reports about the same event made in different contexts can vary substantially and yet be similarly accurate (Blank, 2009; Drivdahl & Hyman, 2014). Therefore, although perhaps odd from the perspective of traditional memory investigators, the study of autobiographical remembering can be advanced with little reference to objective accuracy.

Our work builds on the tradition that views remembering as to some degree reconstructive in nature, and that labelling mental representations as ‘memories’ or otherwise reflects metacognitive attributions based on mental experience at the time of remembering (Johnson & Raye, 1981; Neisser, 1967; Rubin, 2005). A number of approaches share the proposition that multiple metacognitive appraisals contribute to remembering (Mazzoni & Kirsch, 2002; Rubin, 2006; Scoboria et al., 2014). In one of the more comprehensive efforts, Brewer (1996) defined autobiographical memories as possessing the distinct components of vivid imagery, belief that the resulting mental representation represents the past faithfully, and belief that the represented events genuinely occurred.

### 1.1. Recollection

Reminiscence includes conscious awareness of remembering, re-experiencing of perceptual details of the event, recognizing the spatial and temporal characteristics of the event, and novel appraisal of the event as it influences current emotion. This cumulative recollective experience results in a subjective feeling of re-experiencing the past that differentiates remembering from imagining (Tulving, 1985). A large body of work illustrates that recollective experience (variously named episodic memory; believed memory; recollective memory) makes key contributions to remembering when present (Tulving, 1983; Johnson, Hashtroudi & Lindsay, 1996; Cabeza & Moscovitch, 2013; Yonelinas, 2002).

There is a clear distinction between the mental simulation and the recollection of events (Addis, Pan, Vu, Laiser, & Schacter, 2009). As discussed in the work on source monitoring (Johnson, Hashtroudi, & Lindsay, 1993), it is possible to differentiate subjective experiences of remembering from imagining, without defining remembering as being objectively related to past events and imagining as being

independent of objective reality. Therefore, an individual may recollect an event that did not in fact occur and yet still identify that experience as distinct from fantasizing about an event that is known not to have occurred. Recollection can thus be viewed as the presence of an episodic mental simulation accompanied by a sense of re-experiencing.

### 1.2. Autobiographical belief

Autobiographical belief (also *belief in occurrence*), is the belief that an event occurred to the self in the past. While memories have long been recognized as including a sense of genuineness (e.g., James, 1890; Lampinen & Odegard, 2006; Pillemer, 1998; Rubin, 2012; Tulving, 1983), less attention has been directed to the degree that recollection and autobiographical belief are dissociable. A growing body of evidence supports such a distinction (Mazzoni & Kirsch, 2002; Mazzoni, Scoboria, & Harvey, 2010; Scoboria, Mazzoni, Kirsch, & Reyea, 2004). Suggesting false events frequently results in reports that events occurred without accompanying recollection (Bernstein, Pernat, & Loftus, 2011; Hart & Schooler, 2006; Scoboria, Lynn, Hessen & Fisico, 2007). Studies of nonbelieved memories show the converse case, in which the strength of recollection exceeds that of autobiographical belief (Clark, Nash, Fincham, & Mazzoni, 2012; Mazzoni, Nash, & Clark, 2014; Otgaar, Scoboria, & Smeets, 2013; Scoboria & Talarico, 2013).

Scoboria et al. (2014; see also Scoboria & Talarico, 2013, Study 3) demonstrated that recollection and autobiographical belief form distinct latent constructs, that each is predicted by different variables, and that their correspondence varies depending on the type of event under study. Autobiographical belief judgments are influenced by a wider variety of processes and sources of information. These include the presence of recollection, the plausibility of events, and social feedback about events, to select just three of the more prominent influences (Scoboria, Boucher, & Mazzoni, in press; Wade, Nash, & Garry, 2014). Such observations have led to the proposition that autobiographical belief is the summative appraisal of all evidence available at the time that an event is remembered (Scoboria et al., 2014).<sup>1</sup>

### 1.3. Belief in accuracy

The distinction between autobiographical belief and belief in the accuracy of a recollected mental simulation is the difference between asking “Did this event occur?” and “Am I remembering this event in the way that it occurred?” When an event is recollected, the details of that recollection become subject to evaluation. The default assumption is that one would believe the contents of a recollection. However, most individuals are open to re-evaluating their memory from time to time if confronted with skepticism, contradictory evidence, or a need

<sup>1</sup> See Scoboria and Talarico (2013) for discussion of the relationship between autobiographical belief and the remember/know distinction.

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