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## Continuity of phenomenology and (in)consistency of content of meaningful autobiographical memories

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### ABSTRACT

Phenomenology is a critical component of autobiographical memory retrieval; it reflects both (a) memory-specific features and (b) stable individual differences. Few studies have tested phenomenology longitudinally. The present work examined the continuity of memory phenomenology in a sample of Italian adults ( $N = 105$ ) over a 4-week period. Participants retrieved two 'key' personal memories, a Turning Point and an Early Childhood Memory, rated the phenomenology of each memory, and completed measures of personality, psychological distress and subjective well-being. Phenomenological ratings were moderately stable over time (median correlation  $>.40$ ), regardless of memory content. Personality traits, psychological distress and well-being were associated with phenomenology cross-sectionally and with changes in phenomenology over time. These results suggest that how individuals re-experience their most important personal memories is relatively consistent over time and shaped by both trait and state aspects of psychological functioning.

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## 1. Introduction

Subjective experience (phenomenology) is a critical component of autobiographical memory retrieval (Sutin & Robins, 2007; Tulving, 2002). When an individual remembers an important event from his/her life (e.g., the birth of a child, wedding day, etc.), he/she may see the scene as it is re-happening and re-experience the emotions felt at the time. An individual may consistently rate one particular memory as extremely vivid and emotionally intense (or, likewise, consistently dim and fragmented) either because of the visual clarity and emotional charge of that particular event or because all of his/her memories tend to be vivid and emotionally intense. When an individual retrieves a memory, its phenomenology reflects both (a) memory- and event-specific features and (b) stable individual characteristics (Singer & Salovey, 1993).

Phenomenology is a dynamic feature of autobiographical recollection that may fluctuate based on the importance of the event in the memory, the relevance to the individual's current goals, and/or the emotional state of the individual at the time of retrieval. Few studies, however, have assessed autobiographical memory longitudinally. Most longitudinal work has focused more on the consistency and accuracy of memory content than how phenomenology fluctuates over time. Hirst et al. (2015), for example, examined memories of the attack of September 11, 2001 at 1 week and at 1, 3 and 10 years after the attack and found marked inconsistencies for canonical features (e.g., how did you first learn about the attack?) across the follow-ups. The content of memories often changes over time, especially for specific information (e.g. locations, activities,

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etc.; Drivdahl & Hyman, 2014). Even when reporting the most meaningful personal life events, less than 20% of specific events are repeated across interviews (McAdams et al., 2006; Thorne, Cutting, & Skaw, 1998). Still, many individuals identify the same experience as a ‘key event’ even after several years (e.g., Bauer, Tasdemir-Ozdes, & Larkina, 2014; Leonard & Burns, 2006). Whether or not an individual recalls the same or a different experience, relatively consistent narrative themes are observed across sessions (McAdams et al., 2006; Thorne et al., 1998) and the emotions and motivations retrieved tend to be consistent across memories and over time (Sutin & Robins, 2005).

Consistency may extend to phenomenological characteristics of the memory (e.g., vividness, emotional intensity, etc.). Rubin, Schrauf, and Greenberg (2004), for example, examined participants’ ratings of several phenomenological qualities over a short-term interval. Participants ( $N = 30$  students) recalled and rated 20 events twice over a two-week period. The consistency of phenomenology was moderate ( $r = \sim .50$ ) within participant ratings of the 20 events and the stability of memory phenomenology was high ( $r = \sim .80$ ) across the two sessions. Recently, Thomsen, Hammershøj Olesen, Schnieber, Jensen, and Tønnesvang (2012) showed that memories for important life events maintained or slightly increased in their levels of pleasantness, emotional intensity, and importance compared to trivial control memories over a 3-month period, and were still rated as important after three years (Thomsen et al., 2015). Meaningful memories tend to remain vividly detailed even after several years (Luchetti, Montebanocci, Rossi, Cutti, & Sutin, 2014), though the specific details may shift (Hirst et al., 2015). There is also stability in the proportion of specific versus overgeneral memories retrieved by participants in response to cue-words up to several years (Sumner et al., 2014). Less work has examined the full range of phenomenological qualities to address whether some aspects of phenomenology are more stable than others.

How individuals retrieve and re-experience their memories may be shaped, in part, by trait (e.g., underlying personality dispositions) and state (e.g., symptoms of anxiety and depression) psychological functioning (e.g., Rasmussen & Berntsen, 2010; Rubin, Boals, & Berntsen, 2008; Rubin & Siegler, 2004; Sutin & Robins, 2010). For instance, individuals who score high on Openness to experience—the tendency to explore inner worlds through ideas, fantasies and feelings—tend to report stronger reliving qualities when recalling an autobiographical event (Rasmussen & Berntsen, 2010; Rubin & Siegler, 2004). For example, open individuals tend to retrieve memories that are perceived as vivid and coherent and central to their life stories (Rasmussen & Berntsen, 2010). Individuals high in Neuroticism, who have a negative worldview, tend to retrieve memories that are more negative in valence and emotionally intense and psychologically distance themselves from their more positive memories (Sutin, 2008). For individuals high in Conscientiousness, their tendency to be organized extends to how they retrieve their past experiences; that is, they tend to perceive their memories as vivid and coherent (Sutin, 2008). There are no consistent associations between Extraversion and Agreeableness and phenomenology, and no studies have examined the five traits in relation to changes in phenomenology.

The phenomenology of autobiographical memory has been linked to psychological distress (e.g., Sutin & Gillath, 2009) and clinical disorders (see Sumner, 2012; Williams et al., 2007 for reviews). Some phenomenological dimensions (e.g., specificity/coherence) play a critical role in the development and maintenance of clinical conditions, such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (e.g., Boelen, Huntjens, & van den Hout, 2014; Sumner, Mineka, & McAdams, 2013). Symptoms of distress are generally associated with the retrieval of less phenomenologically intense memories (less vivid, coherent and detailed memories; Luchetti & Sutin, 2015). Recollection of personal experiences that are phenomenologically-rich, in contrast, may increase an overall sense of well-being and life satisfaction (Latorre et al., 2013; Sutin, 2008; Waters & Fivush, 2014).

The aim of the present work is to examine the stability of the phenomenology of autobiographical memory across memories and over time. Specifically, participants were asked to retrieve two ‘key’ moments of their life—an important life-changing event (Turning Point Memory) and a remote event (Early Childhood Memory)—and rate the affect and phenomenology of each memory at two sessions separated by 4 weeks. In addition, we examine the relation between participants’ phenomenological experience of their memories and five-factor personality traits, psychological distress and well-being and whether changes in memory phenomenology are associated with these aspects of psychological functioning.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

The study utilized an on-line survey created with Qualtrics software ([www.qualtrics.com](http://www.qualtrics.com)) and distributed by electronic mail to a community sample from Italy. Participants provided informed consent in person at the time of recruitment. They were asked to complete a memory task (Block 1)—i.e. a Turning Point and an Early Childhood Memory—and a series of self-report questionnaires (Block 2) on two separate occasions. Once the first survey was completed (Time 1), a second link was sent again to each respondent after 4 weeks (Time 2). On average, it took about an hour to complete the survey. The order of memory recall and the order of survey blocks were counterbalanced across participants.<sup>1</sup> Ethical approval for the study was

<sup>1</sup> Forty-three percent of the sample completed the Memory Task (Block 1) first and 57% of the sample completed the Questionnaires (Block 2) first. Half of the participants recalled the Turning Point Memory first, while the other half recalled the Early Childhood Memory first. Independent  $t$ -tests were performed to test order effects on the memory measures; only 8 of 56 tests were significant.

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