



Emotion knowledge and autobiographical memory across the preschool years: A cross-cultural longitudinal investigation [☆]

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Received 1 September 2006; revised 28 October 2007; accepted 5 February 2008

Abstract

Knowledge of emotion situations facilitates the interpretation, processing, and organization of significant personal event information and thus may be an important contributor to the development of autobiographical memory. This longitudinal study tested the hypothesis in a cross-cultural context. The participants were native Chinese children, Chinese children from first-generation Chinese immigrant families in the U.S., and European American children. Children's developing emotion knowledge and autobiographical memory were assessed three times at home, when children were 3, 3.5, and 4.5 years of age. Children's emotion knowledge uniquely predicted their autobiographical memory ability across groups and time points. Emotion knowledge further mediated culture effects on autobiographical memory. The findings provide important insight into early autobiographical memory development, and extend current theoretical understandings of the emotion–memory interplay. They further have implications for the phenomenon of infantile amnesia and cross-cultural differences in childhood recollections.

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[☆] This research was supported by NIMH Grant R01-MH64661 to the author. I thank members of the Social Cognition Development Lab at Cornell University for their contributions to the project. I also thank Françoise Vermeylen for statistical consultation. Special thanks go to the children and families who made this study possible.

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Keywords: Emotion knowledge; Autobiographical memory; Memory development; Culture

1. Introduction

Autobiographical memory (AM) encompasses memory for personally significant, specific event episodes from an individual's life (Nelson & Fivush, 2004). It is critical for self-identity and psychological well-being. One important characteristic of autobiographical memory is that it is often accompanied by heightened emotional reactions (McGaugh, 2003; Pillemer, 1998; Stein & Liwag, 1997). Emotion is generally held to be important or even essential to autobiographical remembering, and researchers have identified a host of mechanisms underlying the emotional effects (Christianson & Safer, 1996; McGaugh, 2003; Reisberg & Hertel, 2004). However, little theoretical or empirical attention has been paid to the mnemonic function of emotion knowledge (EK, or emotion situation knowledge), that is, the schematic knowledge of situational antecedents of emotions (Denham, Zoller, & Couchoud, 1994; Stein & Liwag, 1997). Literature of three different research areas, on the other hand, has suggested a plausible link of such knowledge to autobiographical remembering, which calls for further investigation.

1.1. Cognitive perspectives

From an information-processing point of view, EK provides a knowledge structure or mental schema based on which cognitive processes of appraisal, interpretation, or meaning analysis of an event situation can be carried out (Frijda, 1986; Stein & Liwag, 1997). Such cognitive processes are deeply involved in the anticipation and actual experience of emotions within the situation, no matter whether they initiate or simply mediate the emotional experience (Lazarus, 1982; Schachter & Singer, 1962). As Frijda (1986) claims, "Emotional experience, first of all, is experience of the situation" (p. 193). The resulting emotional activation, in turn, may trigger special encoding and consolidation mechanisms that facilitate memory formation (Christianson & Safer, 1996; McGaugh, 1995; McGaugh, 2003).

Furthermore, cognitive appraisal of the event situation enabled by EK may allow the individual to fully appreciate the emotional meaning and, thus, personal significance, of the event, making the event more memorable (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Pillemer, Picariello, & Pruett, 1994). And just like other schemas or scripts (Neisser, 1981; Schank, 1982), EK may provide an organizational structure to process and represent significant personal event information with co-assembled affect scenes, allowing the information to be well integrated into the autobiographical knowledge base and be effectively stored and retrieved (Conway & Bekerian, 1987; Tomkins, 1979). As a result, an autobiographical memory with event-specific details may be formed. The memory may further integrate emotional-evaluative information (e.g., "I was so happy!") indicative of cognitive and emotional processing enabled by EK.

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