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When autobiographical memory begins

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Abstract

The authors review competing theories concerning the emergence and early development of autobiographical memory. It is argued that the differences between these accounts, although important, may be more apparent than real. The crux of these disagreements lies not in *what* processes are important, but rather, the *role* these different processes play in the emergence of autobiographical memory and the *temporal primacy* of these controlling variables. These differences are explored theoretically and then extant as well as new data are brought to bear on these issues. What emerges is a new, more inclusive, multifactorial framework that integrates the controlling variables from diverse perspectives providing a more complete account of the beginnings of autobiographical memory.

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Research over the past decade has yielded a lively debate over the origin and subsequent development of autobiographical memory. Howe and Courage (1993, 1997) have argued that the necessary and founding achievement for the onset of autobiographical memory is the establishment of the cognitive self, an event that occurs late in the second year of life. This cornerstone event sets the lower limit on the age at which memories can be encoded, stored, and retrieved as personal—as something that happened to “me,”—and coincides roughly with the point at which a number of recent, well-controlled studies have dated the onset of adults’ earliest memories

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for certain significant life events (e.g., Eacott & Crawley, 1998; Usher & Neisser, 1993). Like the onset of autobiographical memory itself, Howe and Courage contend that the accumulation of autobiographical memories follows the same course of development, involving the same basic mechanisms and processes, as other aspects of memory.

Alternative views of the onset and development of autobiographical memory set a rather different time course for this achievement. For example, Nelson, Fivush and their colleagues (e.g., Fivush, 1994, 1997; Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 1996; Fivush & Reese, 1992; Nelson, 1993, 1996) arguing from a sociolinguistic perspective contend that autobiographical memory follows the ability of the child to establish a “personal life story” in memory, an achievement that occurs through conversations with adults and significant others in which personal events and experiences are shared. As this autobiographical memory requires a certain level of linguistic and narrative competence, it does not come on line until the preschool years and by definition precludes the infant and toddler periods (see also Pillemer & White, 1989). Also espousing a later age of onset, Perner and Ruffman (1995) have tied the emergence of autobiographical memory to more general advances in metacognition, specifically to children’s emerging theory of mind. They argue that event memory in very young children is initially based on “noetic” awareness or “knowing” something happened rather than on “autonoetic” awareness or “remembering” something happened (see Tulving, 1984) and that the transition from one to the other at around the age of 4 years marks the beginning of autobiographical memory. Consistent with the sociolinguistic perspective, they believe that children’s conversations with others (mothers in particular) serve as an important source of data for the development of their theory of the mind, in turn promoting the establishment of children’s autobiographical memory.

The age gap in the onset of autobiographical memory that exists between the proponents of the cognitive self perspective and those of the sociolinguistic and metacognitive perspectives is significant for both practical and theoretical reasons. From a pragmatic point of view, establishing the earliest age at which adults can recall personally experienced events has profound forensic implications concerning the veracity of recollections about abusive or traumatic incidents that allegedly occurred in early childhood (see Howe, 2000). From a theoretical point of view, it gets to the crux of a number of central issues in the debate over the nature and functioning of early memory (e.g., the role of consciousness in infant memory, the relationship between implicit and explicit processes), the resolution of which promises to have considerable scientific merit in its own rite. We will argue here that this debate over the importance of the cognitive self versus sociolinguistic factors in the development of autobiographical memory may be more apparent than real. That is, both the cognitive self and sociolinguistic factors are important to the development of autobiographical memory. However, what differs is the role each play and the temporal primacy of these controlling variables. Specifically, we continue to maintain that it is the emergence of the cognitive self late in the second year of life that launches autobiographical memory and that the coincident developments in both language and social cognition that occur in the same time frame

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