



Conscious recollection in autobiographical memory: An investigation in schizophrenia

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Abstract

Whether or not conscious recollection in autobiographical memory is affected in schizophrenia is unknown. The aim of this study was to address this issue using an experiential approach. An autobiographical memory enquiry was used in combination with the Remember/Know procedure. Twenty-two patients with schizophrenia and 22 normal subjects were asked to recall specific autobiographical memories from four lifetime periods and to indicate the subjective states of awareness associated with the recall of what happened, when and where. They gave Remember, Know or Guess responses according to whether they recalled these aspects of the event on the basis of conscious recollection, simply know-

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ing, or guessing. Results showed that the frequency and consistency of Remember responses was significantly lower in patients than in comparison subjects. In contrast, the frequency of Know responses was not significantly different, whereas the frequency of patients' Guess responses was significantly enhanced. It is concluded that the frequency and consistency of conscious recollection in autobiographical memory is reduced in patients with schizophrenia.

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1. Introduction

It is well established that schizophrenia is associated with episodic memory impairments (e.g., Bilder et al., 2000; Gold, Randolph, Carpenter, Goldberg, & Weinberger, 1992; Heinrichs & Zakzanis, 1998; Palmer et al., 1997; Saykin et al., 1991, 1994). These impairments have been consistently demonstrated in free-recall (Koh & Peterson, 1978), cued-recall (Schwartz, Rosse, & Deutsch, 1993) and, to a lesser degree, recognition tasks (Aleman, Hijman, de Haan, & Kahn, 1999; Calev, 1984). Recent approaches to memory make a distinction between episodic and autobiographical memory (Conway, 2001). Episodic memory is now viewed as a memory system that retains knowledge of recent episodes over retention intervals measured in minutes and hours, whereas autobiographical memory retains knowledge of personal events and facts over retention intervals measured in weeks, months, years and across the life span. There is evidence that autobiographical memory is also affected in schizophrenia (Baddeley, Thornton, Chua, & McKenna, 1995; Feinstein, Goldberg, Nowlin, & Weinberger, 1998). Patients recall few specific autobiographical memories (Riutort, Cuervo, Danion, Peretti, & Salamé, 2003). The deficit is more marked after the onset of the disease and may reflect encoding or acquisition problems (Elvevåg, Maylor, & Gilbert, 2003; Riutort et al., 2003).

Conway and Pleydell-Pearce (2000) have recently put forward a model of autobiographical memory that has a unique feature in that it brings together autobiographical memories, conscious awareness and the autobiographical self. The model postulates that autobiographical memories are transitory mental constructions generated from an autobiographical knowledge base, where knowledge is held at different levels of specificity. The most specified level is that of highly specific single details, such as the sensory-perceptual details of a particular event. When accessed, these details give rise to specific autobiographical memories accompanied by the subjective experience of conscious recollection. Conscious recollection corresponds to the experience of travelling through subjective time and mentally reliving past events. Because most of these consciously recollected memories are primarily related to both our past and present goals, motivations, and desires, they are the basis for a subjective sense of self insofar as we are able to recognise ourselves in our goals and desires and to produce a personal narrative. They convey the belief that the self experiencing the present is the same as the self that experienced the past. In contrast, the subjective experience of simply knowing that a personal event has occurred arises when more generic, abstract knowledge is accessed in the autobiographical knowledge base. Lifetime periods are the most abstract knowledge structures, containing knowl-

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