



Switching memory perspective

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ABSTRACT

The perspective in which memories were spontaneously recalled, field (original perspective) or observer (see oneself in the memory), was examined for both recent and remote memories. Recent memories were dominated by field perspective whilst remote memories were dominated by observer perspective. Further, field memories contained reliably more episodic detail than observer memories. After a 1-week interval, the same memories were recalled again but with a switched memory perspective. Switching from an observer to a field perspective did not reliably increase the amount of episodic details in a memory. Switching from field to observer perspective did, however, reliably reduce the number of episodic details. These findings suggest that memories may be represented in long-term memory with a fixed perspective, either field or observer, which can be temporarily altered sometimes changing the nature of a memory, i.e. how much detail remains accessible.

1. Introduction

In one of the first ever surveys of human memory [Henri and Henri \(1896\)](#) noted that some of their respondents occasionally described seeing themselves in their memories, a phenomenon later described by [Freud \(1915\)](#) as being indicative of a memory that had been ‘edited’ or recoded. [Nigro and Neisser \(1983\)](#) revived interest in memory perspective and introduced the terms ‘field’ and ‘observer’ perspectives to denote respectively: a memory that preserves something approximating to a person’s original point-of-view during the experience that is remembered or, alternatively, a memory in which the person sees or observes him/herself. The perspective experienced when a memory initially comes to mind is thought to arise non-consciously and unintentionally, although this perspective is not necessarily stable during extended recall of the same memory and may change as the remembered event unfolds ([Rubin, 2006](#)). Others have also pointed out that perspective can be intentionally changed and that rememberers can switch back and forth between perspectives ([Robinson & Swanson, 1993](#)).

A number of studies have revealed that field perspective is more common than observer perspective, with only a minority of memories recalled with an observer perspective ([Nigro & Neisser, 1983](#); [Rice & Rubin, 2011](#)). [Nigro and Neisser \(1983\)](#) proposed several factors that may contribute to the determination of memory perspective, in particular the age of the memory: recent experiences are more likely to be remembered from a field perspective and older events from an observer perspective. This is now a well-established finding ([Frank & Gilovich, 1989](#); [Kihlstrom & Harackiewicz, 1982](#); [Rice & Rubin, 2009](#)). Field perspective memories also predominate for experiences that were emotional at the time of their encoding ([D’Argembeau et al., 2003](#)). However, [Robinson and Swanson \(1993\)](#) found that emotionality can be influenced by manipulating the perspective. Participants were asked to recollect autobiographical events from various times in their lives, to classify each memory as either ‘field’ or ‘observer’ and rate its emotional

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intensity on two levels – how the event made them feel when it took place and how they felt about it at recollection. One week later, participants recalled the same events a second time – either from the original vantage point or from the alternative perspective – and again rated their past and present emotional intensity. Although there was little change in the ratings of original and current emotionality when the vantage point remained constant or when it shifted from observer to field, there was a marked decrease in both measures when the perspective was switched from field to observer. As Schacter (1996) has remarked, these results suggest that not only does the emotional intensity of an event depend in part on how one goes about remembering it, but also the emotions one attributes to the past sometimes arise from the way in which memories are retrieved in the present.

Field perspective memories are, then, associated mostly with a feeling of re-experiencing the phenomenological features of the original event, accompanied by a high degree of vividness and recollective experience. Further, specific and detailed memories are more likely to be recalled with field perspective. In contrast, observer memories contain more descriptive detail but less sensory and emotional information (Berntsen & Rubin, 2006; D'Argembeau et al., 2003; McIsaac & Eich, 2002; McIsaac & Eich, 2004; Nigro & Neisser, 1983; Sutin & Rubin, 2010), typically have longer retention intervals (e.g. Nigro & Neisser, 1983; Rice et al., 2005; Robinson & Swanson, 1993), and higher levels of self-awareness or self-evaluation are reported as being present in the original experience (Frank & Gilovich, 1989; Libby & Eibach, 2002; Nigro & Neisser, 1983). However, individuals reporting disorders such as social anxiety or body dysmorphic disorder report memories from an observer perspective that are highly vivid and emotionally intensive (Hackmann, Clark, & McManus, 2000; Hackmann, Surawy, & Clark, 1998). Observer memories may also be associated with personality factors, for example, McIsaac and Eich (2004) found that the observer perspective predominates when publicly self-conscious individuals recollect their social interactions (see also Robinson & Swanson, 1993) or when people high in 'harm avoidance' (characterised by excessive worrying, pessimism, shyness, being fearful, and easily fatigued) recall their earliest autobiographical experiences (Kihlstrom & Harackiewicz, 1982). Related to this, situations involving a high degree of self-awareness, social anxiety, or physical threat (e.g., speaking in public, running from danger) give rise to more observer than field recollections (Nigro & Neisser, 1983). Finally, instructions to concentrate on the objective circumstances surrounding an event often evoke memories with an observer perspective, whereas asking people to focus on the feelings associated with the original event typically elicits memories recalled with a field perspective (Nigro & Neisser, 1983).

The aim of the present study was to investigate whether switching memory perspective would give rise to the characteristics associated with the altered perspective. For example, if a memory originally and spontaneously recalled with an observer perspective was switched to a field perspective, would the changed perspective give rise to a memory with more specific details? And, conversely, if a memory originally recalled with a field perspective was subsequently recalled with an observer perspective, would this result in fewer reportable details, particularly of emotions and feelings? These questions about the effects of changing perspective are important, given that police officers commonly believe that if they recreate the original encoding environment during an interview (a sort of super-field perspective) this will enhance a victim's memory and their ability to retrieve of specific details (Wells, Morrison, & Conway, 2014). The cognitive interview (CI; Fisher & Geiselman, 1992) is a questioning technique used by police to enhance retrieval of information from witnesses. This approach is now one of the most widely used and accepted forms of interviewing in both the US and the UK (Fisher & Geiselman, 1992; Geiselman, 1994), and is currently taught to police recruits in the UK (Dando, Wilcock, & Milne, 2009). The CI has been shown to elicit detailed, yet accurate, reports from adult witnesses (Davis, McMahon, & Greenwood, 2005; Köhnken, Milne, Memon, & Bull, 1999), children (Geiselman & Padilla, 1988; Memon, Wark, Holley, Bull, & Köhnken, 1997), and older witnesses (Wright & Holliday, 2007). We suggest that, at least in part, the CI may powerfully reinstate a field perspective and, possibly in this way, enhance recall of details.

In the present study participants were instructed to recall six early and six recent memories. In each case, they were asked to state the perspective with which the memory was recalled and asked to provide subjective recollective measures such as vividness, emotional intensity and personal importance. Previous studies (Nigro & Neisser, 1983; Robinson & Swanson, 1993) have found that early memories are predominantly recalled with an observer perspective whilst recent memories are predominantly recalled with a field perspective. Asking participants to provide memories from both of these age groups in the current study allowed for this to be tested and controlled for. The recollective measures were recorded in order to investigate whether perspective switching would alter the qualitative nature of the memories. One week later, participants were cued to recall the same memories again but instructed to switch the memory perspective. They were asked to provide the same recollective measures as at time 1. We expected that when the switch was from field to observer that fewer episodic details would be recalled relative to the first, field-perspective, memory. However, when the switch was from an observer perspective to a field perspective memory we expected that more episodic details would be recalled in the second recall relative to the first observer-perspective recall, i.e. memory would be enhanced. Further, in line with current literature (Nigro & Neisser, 1983; Rice & Rubin, 2011) we expected memories recalled with a field perspective to be reliably more vivid, personally important and emotionally intense as compared to memories recalled with an observer perspective. We expected that when participants switched from field to observer perspective, these three variables would be rated reliably lower. Relatedly, when the switch was from an observer perspective to a field perspective memory we expected these three variables to be rated as reliably higher. Such a pattern of findings would, in several ways, lend support to the CI and to investigator-interviewing practices.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

There were thirty-three females and two males, with a mean age of 21.5 ($SD = 8.74$) years, recruited from the general population.

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