Reconstructing autobiographical memories for the present: Objectification, anchoring, generational effect and social contexts

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The present study examines the representational content of voluntary and involuntary autobiographical memories (objectification), as well as the anchorings according to age, sex and time contexts. 1,200 individuals of both sexes and different ages participated in this study and were asked to write down three memory events and three “oblivion” events in a personal, family and social framework and to note the date that these events took place. The results highlight the significance of social contexts in the reconstruction of the autobiographical past, which are space, time and different affiliation groups. The content of autobiographical memory is constructed through everyday relationships between the individuals and the members of the groups they belong to. Family, school, friends, the workspace, the socio-historical and political framework of their era provide the individuals with identity references. Both the quality and the time reference of the events depend on the age of the participants.

KEY-WORDS: Autobiographical Memory, Social memory and social oblivion, Social representations, Social contexts, Generational effect.

Introduction

The aim of the present study was to examine personal, family and social events people would like to remember or would rather forget, in order to identify what, why and through which processes people deliberately choose to remember or intentionally forget. Intentional forgetting of events, although not studied, as an on-line process per se in the present context, is also a form of remembering, albeit involuntary; along with its voluntary counterpart involuntary remembering supplies autobiographical memory with its contents. Autobiographical memory can be furthermore distinguished into “personal”, “family” and “social” depending on the individual, interpersonal or social nature of the experienced event (Mado-

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Personal memory includes events that have been mostly experienced individually, even though interpersonal in nature, and belong to the subject's more private personal life. Family memory comprises experiences resulting from family interactions and events individuals have shared with their family. Personal and family autobiographical memories are usually based on events directly experienced by the individual. Social memories however, represent general social knowledge about events, which is filtered by the personally internalized socially dominant system of norms and values.

Thus, the distinction among the different kinds of voluntary and involuntary autobiographical memories can have both a theoretical and a functional significance. On the one hand, it provides us with a better descriptive understanding of the possible structure of autobiographical memory contents and on the other hand, it helps us appreciate some of its functions. For example, research has indicated that an individual that has experienced rape is less likely to acknowledge it among personal events of involuntary remembering or forgetfulness and more likely to mention it in general as an event that a generalized other would rather forget (Madoglou, 2005; Madoglou, 2008).

It has long been argued that memory is selective. Some events will be retained whereas others will gradually be put aside and wane (Todorov, 2004). Selection of memory traces is not random but purposeful aiming at securing individual and social identity for present and future time. Voluntary memory contents contain events enhancing individual identity, while the ones of involuntary memory comprise events threatening it (Candau, 1998; Haas & Jodelet, 1999). It is then important in studying memory to not only concentrate on what people do know but also on what they know that they “should not know”. Remembering and forgetting are both human strategies.

In the subsequent sections we will first define the concepts of social autobiographical remembering and forgetting; we will then describe how they relate to the notion of social representations and illustrate the functions they serve. Finally, we will discuss the relationship of autobiographical memories with the so called “generational effect” and the social contexts of their construction.

1. Autobiographical memories

Autobiographical memory, although social in essence, can be seen as a set of past events (negative or positive) which significantly defined the individual. Auriat (1996) defines autobiographical memory as the recollection of self-defining personal past events, whereas Piolino, Desgranges & Eustache (2000) describe