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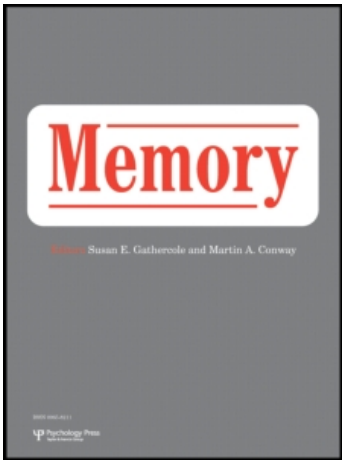

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The identity function of autobiographical memory: Time is on our side

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The identity function of autobiographical memory: Time is on our side

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Autobiographical memory plays an important role in the construction of personal identity. We review evidence of the bi-directional link between memory and identity. Individuals' current self-views, beliefs, and goals influence their recollections and appraisals of former selves. In turn, people's current self-views are influenced by *what* they remember about their personal past, as well as *how* they recall earlier selves and episodes. People's reconstructed evaluations of memories, their perceived distance from past experiences, and the point of view of their recollections have implications for how the past affects the present. We focus on how people's constructions of themselves through time serve the function of creating a coherent—and largely favourable—view of their present selves and circumstances.

"We are what we eat" is a currently popular mantra. More interested in cognition than nutrition, psychologists are likely to assert, "We are what we remember" (Albert, 1977; Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; James, 1890/1950). Noting the dependence of self-identity on autobiographical memory, William James (1890/1950) remarked that were an individual to awake one morning with all personal memories erased, he or she would essentially be a different person. Along the same lines, Schacter (1996) described a head-injury patient who lost his autobiographical memories and, as a result, his associated sense of self. Logically, autobiographical memory plays an indirect role in even the social sources of self-knowledge (e.g., reflected appraisals, social comparisons; Sedikides & Skowronski, 1995), because much of this knowledge may be stored in other people's memories of interactions with self. In the current paper we examine the links between autobiographical memory and self-identity. It may be a truism to say that self-identity depends on autobiographical memory, but the nature and strength of the association depends on qualities of both the self-identity and the memories. Moreover the relation is reciprocal: People's recollections influence their self-views and vice versa (Figure 1). We describe motives and cognitive processes that connect self-identity to autobiographical memory. We begin by considering the influence of current self-views and beliefs on people's reconstructions of the past. We then describe how people's motives and cognitive processes affect their reactions to their pasts, as well as the impact of their recalled pasts on current self-views.

CURRENT SELF-VIEWS INFLUENCE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MEMORY

The current self—with its associated characteristics, goals, and beliefs—influences how individuals recall their pasts (Bartlett, 1932; Fischhoff &

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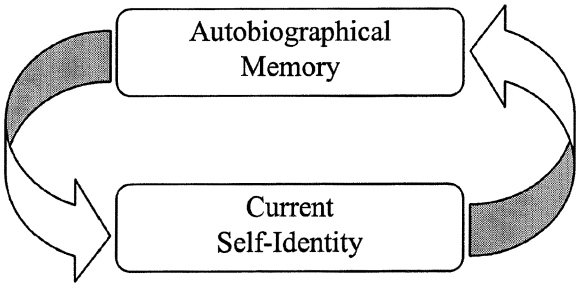

Figure 1. Bi-directional relation between autobiographical memory and current identity.

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Beyth, 1975; Greenwald, 1980; Mead, 1929/64; Ross, 1989; Ross & Buehler, 1994; Singer & Salovey, 1993). Ross (1989) focused on how people reconstruct their earlier attributes and feelings. He reasoned that such recollections often involve a two-step process. Because present attributes and feelings are frequently more accessible than past ones, individuals start with current self-appraisals, such as ''How do I feel about 'X' today.'' Next, people invoke implicit theories about the stability of their own attributes and feelings to construct a past that is similar to or different from the present. Ross (1989) reviewed a large number of studies that provided support for this analysis. For example, several researchers obtained evidence that people reconstruct their past attitude on an issue by first considering their present opinion and then evaluating whether or not they had reason to suppose that their views had shifted over time. People tend to assume that their attitudes are stable and therefore infer (sometimes incorrectly) that their prior attitudes are similar to their present views.

According to the implicit theories approach, people who believe that their attributes are stable will tend to construct a past consistent with this belief. By the same token, people who expect change (progress or decline) on a dimension will revise the past upward or downward accordingly. Conway and Ross (1984) studied participants in a study skills programme. Participants believe in the efficacy of such courses, but like most similar skills programmes Conway and Ross's was ineffective. Participants evaluated their study skills before and after participating in the skills programme. Conway and Ross reasoned that participants could maintain their belief in the value of an ineffective treatment by retrospectively amplifying their deficiencies prior to the programme. In essence participants could say to themselves: ''I may not be perfect now but I was much worse before taking the course.''

At the conclusion of the study skills course, Conway and Ross asked participants to recall their pre-programme evaluations of their study skills. They were told to recall their ratings as accurately as possible and were reminded that the researcher had their prior evaluations. Course participants remembered their ratings as being worse than they had reported initially. In contrast, waiting-list control participants who did not take the course showed no systematic recall bias over the same time period. The biased recollections of individuals who took the course would support a belief that the programme improved their skills. Other research has demonstrated that when people possess a theory of decline (e.g., memory in older adults), they may retrospectively revise the past upwards, recalling themselves as better than they likely had been (e.g., McFarland, Ross, & Giltrow, 1992).

Although Ross (1989) reported research showing exaggeration of both consistency and change, the former tendency seemed much more common. Ross noted developmental evidence suggesting that people's attributes are quite stable and concluded that perhaps people simply over-generalise an often valid theory of consistency. Alternatively, consistency biases may be common because people are motivated to seek evidence from the past that implies a constant self-identity through time. James (1890/1950) claimed that a sense of personal identity requires that one perceive one's self as continuous through time. Albert (1977) concurred and suggested further that people are motivated to establish a consistent self-identity through time. According to Albert, this consistency motivation has implications for memory: People are inclined to recall pasts that are consonant with their current self-views. In other words, autobiographical memory may serve an identity function by enhancing individuals' feelings of personal consistency through time.

Our recent research indicates, however, that people do not always appear to value personal consistency; instead they often highlight shifts in their identities over time. The tendency to exaggerate personal change seems to be more widespread than Ross (1989) supposed. We next examine the role of autobiographical memory in people's perceptions of a particular kind of change in themselves, a tendency to perceive improvement over time.

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THE SELF-ENHANCEMENT FUNCTION OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MEMORY

In his autobiography, Arthur Koestler (1961) remarked that people are critical of their past selves: ''The gauche adolescent, the foolish young man that one has been, appears so grotesque in retrospect and so detached from one's own identity that one automatically treats him with amused derision. It is a callous betrayal, yet one cannot help being a traitor to one's past'' (p. 96). Our own research findings support Koestler's observation. Across various samples (e.g., university students, middle-aged individuals, celebrity interviews) and on a variety of dimensions, people reported their past selves to be inferior to their present self (Wilson & Ross, 2000, 2001a). Karney and his associates found a similar pattern in people's retrospective evaluations of their marriages (Karney & Coombs, 2000; Karney & Frye, 2002). Although marital satisfaction tends to decrease over the early years of a marriage, spouses underestimated their past contentment and often recalled it as lower than their present satisfaction. By deprecating their former satisfaction levels, individuals create the illusion of improvement even in the face of actual decline.

One explanation of such findings is that people are not actually traitors to their past selves, but merely impartial observers of former selves. Perhaps people see a past self as it really was, and view their present self too favourably. Along these lines, George Orwell (1946) recommended judging the truth of an autobiography by its unflattering content: ''Autobiography is only to be trusted when it reveals something disgraceful. A man who gives a good account of himself is probably lying, since any life when viewed from the inside is simply a series of defeats'' (p. 170). Karney and Frye (2002) offered a similar interpretation of their data on marital satisfaction. They suggested that spouses' retrospective evaluations of earlier stages of their marriage are more valid than their current assessments.

Social psychologists have provided considerable evidence that people in Western cultures are motivated to view their current self favourably (Baumeister, 1998; Higgins, 1996; Sedikides, 1993). It seems reasonable to suppose that people are motivated to enhance current and recent former selves, because those selves and their associated outcomes ''belong to'' people's present identity. In contrast, individuals may regard more psychologically remote former selves as no longer associated with their current identity—distant failures lose their power to taint and glories to flatter the present self. As a result, people can view distant selves more dispassionately, heaping scorn when it is due.

Indeed, people might think of past selves as akin to other individuals who vary in closeness to their current self. Recent selves may be comparable to intimate others and distant selves to mere acquaintances or even strangers. People tend to be blind to the faults of their intimates (Murray, Holmes, Dolderman, & Griffin, 2000), but judge distant acquaintances and strangers more severely (e.g., Taylor & Koivumaki, 1976).

Of course, criticism of others is not always valid. For example, people sometimes unfairly derogate others to enhance their own accomplishments (e.g., Tesser, 1988; Wills, 1981). Similarly, a tendency to disparage earlier selves may reflect concerns for self-enhancement rather than accuracy (Ross & Wilson, 2000; Wilson & Ross, 2001a). We suggest that people appraise the past in ways that allow them to view their current self favourably. Although dissociated from people's current self, psychologically distant selves may still serve an identity function. Conceivably, people systematically devalue their distant former selves to create the illusion that they (or their relationships) have improved over time. People find an improving trajectory to be particularly attractive and gratifying (Carver & Sheier, 1990; Frijda, 1988; Hsee, Abelson, & Salovey, 1991; Loewenstein & Prelec, 1993; Loewenstein & Thaler, 1989), partly because they adapt to their current states and so even consistently favourable circumstances become less satisfying over time (Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bulman, 1978). Indeed, Brickman and Campbell (1971) suggested that ''perhaps the happiest adult is one who had a moderately unhappy childhood'' (p. 293), because current state can best be appreciated in contrast with an inferior past. We suggest that it can be just as effective to *recall* a past as inferior, whether or not it actually was.

Examining prospective and retrospective trajectories of newlyweds' relationship satisfaction, Karney and Frye (2002) showed that the perception of improvement is linked to other indicants of relationship success. Spouses' retrospective reports of increases in relationship satisfaction predicted optimism about the relationship's future, even after controlling for any actual change in satisfaction. In contrast, absolute levels

of relationship satisfaction were unrelated to expectations. By derogating earlier aspects of themselves and their relationships, people can make their current state seem superior by comparison and foster optimism about the future.

By examining conditions in which self-enhancement goals may be particularly strong, we obtained more direct evidence that disparaging the past benefits the present self (Wilson & Ross, 2000; studies 4 & 5). We manipulated people's objectives while they described themselves, encouraging participants to adopt the goal of either evaluating themselves favourably or accurately. Participants with a self-enhancement goal were more likely to include an inferior past self in their self-description than were participants with an accuracy goal. Self-enhancement motives also tend to be exacerbated by a threat to self-regard (e.g., Wills, 1981; Wood & Taylor, 1991). McFarland and Alvaro (2000) asked individuals who had experienced a personally disturbing or traumatic past event to evaluate what they were like prior to the episode. Some participants were reminded of the disturbing episode before completing the evaluation and others were not reminded. Participants who were reminded provided inferior evaluations of their earlier, pre-trauma selves. In addition, people were more critical of former selves after being reminded of severely rather than mildly disturbing experiences. This reconstruction of the past may protect current identity: By focusing on how a personally distressing event led to growth or positive outcomes for the self, individuals may minimise the negative impact of the trauma.

Can people maintain a consistent identity (Albert, 1977; James, 1890/1950; Swann & Read, 1981; Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992) while still perceiving improvement? Some researchers have argued that change over time represents a threat to self-consistency, even though it is emotionally gratifying (Keyes & Ryff, 2000). On the contrary, we propose that people can forge a personal narrative that explains and justifies change. Such narratives allow individuals to view themselves as the same person, despite change and improvement (Gergen & Gergen, 1988).

Although individuals can satisfy a desire for self-enhancement by derogating their past, they could perhaps achieve the same end by continually inflating their assessments of present self. There may be psychological advantages, however, to manipulating the past rather than the present. If people continually boosted their current selves rather than criticising their earlier selves, their present self-regard might become so inflated as to be highly inconsistent with objective indicators and difficult to maintain (Baumeister, 1989). Moreover, there are advantages to having a relatively accurate appraisal of one's present attributes. When confronted with a puddle it is useful to know how far one can jump. By derogating the past, individuals are able to create an illusion of improvement without greatly misrepresenting their present strengths and weaknesses.

APPRAISING SUBJECTIVELY RECENT VERSUS DISTANT FORMER SELVES

We have proposed that people are more inclined to criticise distant than close former selves. In our research we have operationalised closeness in terms of both actual and subjective time. As actual time increases, people become more critical of earlier selves. For example, in one study middle-aged participants (M age = 50 years) evaluated their present selves and retrospectively appraised their former selves at ages 35, 19, and 16 on a host of attributes (Wilson & Ross, 2001a). Theoretically, however, we have proposed that evaluations of former selves depend more on the subjective experience of temporal distance than on the actual passage of time. Subjective distance is often related to clock or calendar time: Yesterday typically feels closer than last month or last year. However, psychologists have long recognised that the subjective experience of time is affected by a variety of factors and is sometimes independent of actual time (e.g., Block, 1989; Brown, Rips, & Shevell, 1985; James, 1890/1950; Ross & Wilson, 2002). In our theory of temporal self-appraisal (Ross & Wilson, 2000, 2002; Wilson & Ross, 2001a), we reasoned that when people *feel* close to a past self, its successes and failures psychologically belong to the present, regardless of their actual temporal distance. To test this idea, we manipulated "apparent time" while holding actual time constant. In one study (Wilson & Ross, 2001a), university students evaluated their current self and a self of 2 months ago. In the psychologically close condition, participants were asked to "think of a point in time *in the recent past, the beginning of this term*. What were you like then?" In the psychologically distant condition, participants were instructed to "*Think all the way back to the*

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beginning of this term. What were you like way back then?'' Even though participants were considering the identical time period, this subjective distance manipulation affected their recall of former selves. Those who were induced to regard the time period as recent recalled their former selves as being just as impressive as they were in the present, whereas those who were encouraged to see the same period as distant were significantly more critical of their former than of their current self. Additionally, we reasoned that if criticism and praise are motivated by self-enhancement concerns, then the effects of subjective distance should be strongest when participants evaluate personally significant attributes. Presumably, important dimensions have the greatest impact on overall self-regard (e.g., Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). As predicted, participants were particularly likely to praise psychologically recent and criticise distant former selves when appraising the dimension they had nominated as most important to them. The effect of temporal distance on the appraisal of past and present selves disappeared when participants evaluated themselves on their least important attribute.

FEELINGS OF SUBJECTIVE DISTANCE: PUSHING THE PAST AWAY AND PULLING IT FORWARD

In addition to influencing *what* people remember about their former selves, self-enhancement goals can affect people's subjective judgements of *when* episodes occurred. To this point we have discussed subjective distance as an independent variable: Variations in subjective distance alter appraisals of a past self or episode. In addition, subjective distance can operate as a dependent variable. Although our reconstruction of dates and times can function to organise our autobiographical memory into a chronological sequence (e.g., Thompson, Skowronski, Larsen, & Betz, 1996), our subjective experience of time does not always correspond to clock or calendar time (e.g., Ross & Wilson, 2002). We hypothesised (Ross & Wilson, 2000, 2002) that differences in the evaluative implications of past episodes affect people's feelings of the subjective distance of those events. To protect their current self-regard, people are motivated to feel farther from past failings than from achievements, even when calendar time does not differ.

For example, suppose that a woman suffers a blow to her self-esteem by performing poorly on a job interview. She could perhaps restore her self-regard by erasing her interview from memory, but such forgetting may not be possible. The human brain is not a computer disk from which material can be erased by the tap of a key. Assume instead that our job applicant is able to distance the interview, to feel far away from it. By distancing the interview, the interviewer can render it less relevant to her current self. The poor performance belongs to an earlier and conceivably less able self. Although regarding a negative episode as distant is not the same as forgetting it, the psychological consequences may be comparable. Distancing helps individuals to put their undesirable behaviour behind them. The behaviour belongs to an ''old me''.

A double-edged sword, feelings of subjective distance have implications for the impact on the current self of past achievements as well as failures. As a prior success fades into the distance, its value to the current self diminishes. The achievement belongs to an earlier self. In temporal self-appraisal theory, we hypothesised that individuals can mitigate the effects of time by continuing to feel close to an episode. If an outcome feels recent, the current self can continue to claim credit for it.

Although the hypothesised asymmetry in feelings of distance could include divergent estimates of calendar time, this need not be the case. In our research, we control for actual time and examine feelings of subjective distance for past episodes that could have negative or positive implications for the current self. In one study (Ross & Wilson, 2002), we randomly assigned participants to remember the course in the previous semester in which they received either their best or worst grade. After reporting their grade, participants indicated how distant they felt from the target course on a scale with end-points labelled, ''feels like yesterday'' and ''feels far away''. The results, shown in Figure 2, evidence the predicted asymmetry: Participants felt farther from a course in which they obtained a relatively low grade, even though the actual passage of time did not differ in the two conditions. In subsequent research, we found that this asymmetry reveals both a tendency to pull favourable outcomes forward in subjective time and push inauspicious outcomes backward (Ross & Wilson, 2002), although the latter effect may be somewhat stronger. We also found that the asymmetry was obtained for personal outcomes, but not for outcomes of acquaintances. This self–other difference points to the functional

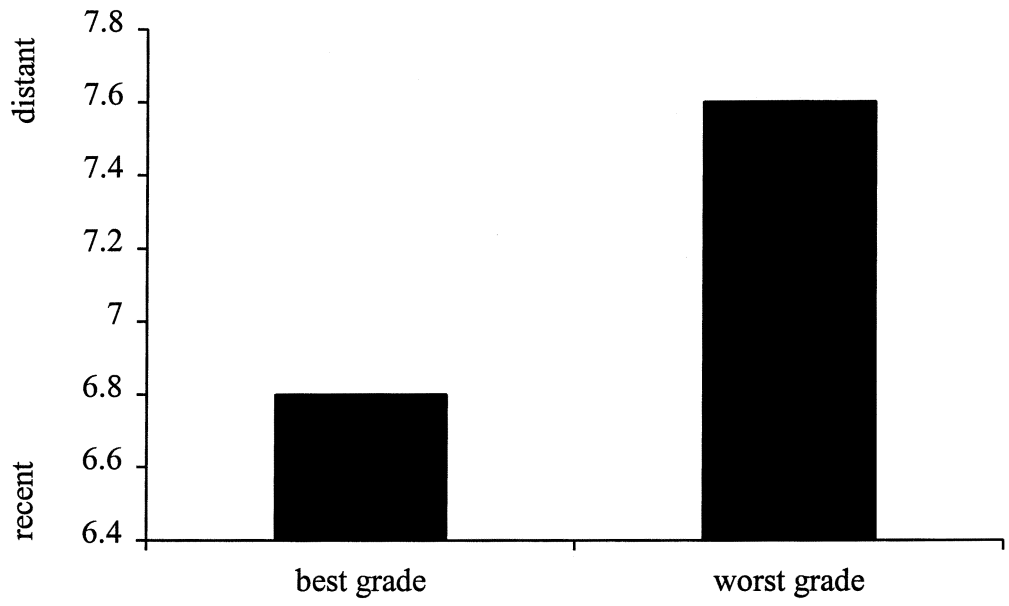

Figure 2. Subjective distance of good and bad past grades, controlling for calendar time. Higher numbers indicate greater subjective distance, controlling for actual time. Calendar time since last academic term did not differ by grade condition.

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significance of feelings of subjective distance. The asymmetry reflects a motivation to protect one's own self-regard; there exists no corresponding inclination to alter the distance of others' experiences. Arguably, shifting the subjective distance of personal events can satisfy self-enhancement goals without necessarily distorting the date or other pertinent facts about the episode.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MEMORIES INFLUENCE CURRENT SELF-VIEWS

We have reviewed evidence that people's memories of their personal pasts (both *what* and *when*) are malleable and may be influenced by current self-identity and self-motives. Next, we examine the other side of the bi-directional relation between autobiographical memory and self-identity. Do people's memory revisions and distancing manoeuvres actually alter the effect of remembered outcomes on current self-regard? We tested this question directly in several studies by experimentally varying people's feelings of distance from past outcomes that differed in valence (Wilson, 2000; Wilson & Ross, 2001b). We varied subjective distance by changing representations of the *spatial* distance between two points on a time line. University students were presented with a time line that spanned many years (e.g., Birth to Today) or only the fairly recent past (e.g., Age 16 to Today). They were instructed to locate and mark a "target" event (e.g., a good or bad past outcome in high school) on the time line. As Figure 3 illustrates, people would be induced to place a target event (in this case, their last semester of high school) much closer to "today" when the time line spanned many years than when it only included the past few years. Moreover, this manipulation altered people's reports of subjective distance from the target event: They felt psychologically closer to the events that were spatially closer to the present. Next, we assessed the impact of feeling close to or far from past episodes on participants' current evaluations. Respondents who were induced to feel close to former failures evaluated their current self less favourably than those who were persuaded to feel distant from the same failures. In contrast, participants encouraged to feel close to earlier successes appraised their current self more favourably than those who were persuaded to see the same successes as more remote.

In these experiments, the actual temporal distance of past events did not differ by condition and we controlled for actual distance in the statistical analyses. Although one might expect an equivalent pattern of results if the events differed in actual as well as subjective time (e.g., Suh, Diener, & Fujita, 1996), our studies demonstrate that subjective distance alone can moderate the impact of remembered outcomes on current self-regard.

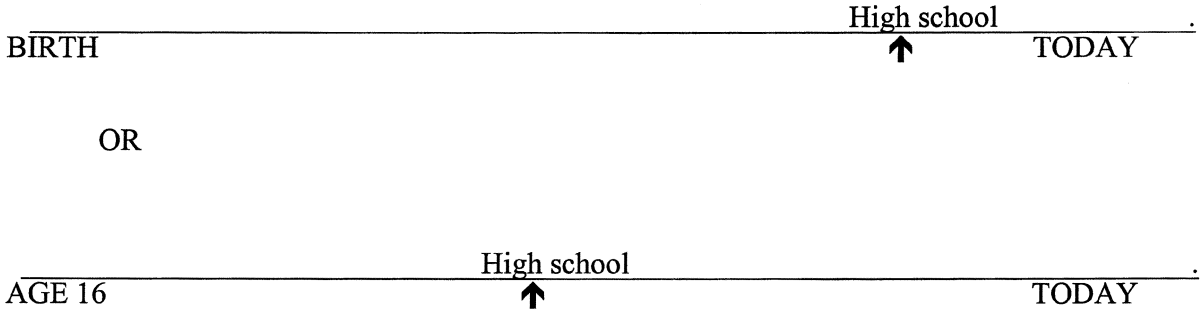

Figure 3. Time line manipulation of spatial distance. The Birth to Today time line makes high school seem subjectively more recent than the Age 16 to Today time line.

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The remembered past affects people's current views of themselves, but *how* they remember matters as much as *what* they remember. The same event has a different impact, depending on whether it feels near or far.

In the course of everyday life, individuals are unlikely to encounter ''time lines'' that alter their experience of temporal distance. We argue, however, that there are many real-life experiences that affect feelings of subjective distance from past episodes. For example, transitions such as changing jobs, cities, or romantic partners may cause the pre-transition self to seem especially remote. In one study, Wilson and Ross (1998) asked students who had moved away from their family home to attend university to indicate how distant they felt from their 17-year-old (pre-transition) self. Half of the students were reminded of their move (by answering questions about it) whereas the remaining participants were not reminded. Students who were reminded of the move reported feeling significantly more distant from their high-school self than did the participants who were not reminded. Milestones such as birthdays, religious conversions, marriages, and even physical or material changes (e.g., getting a new haircut or car) might represent transitions to some individuals, and serve to distance earlier selves. Similarly, severely disturbing personal events may act as transitions that increase feelings of remoteness from prior selves. Feelings of temporal distance could thus contribute to the derogation of pre-trauma selves evidenced in the McFarland and Alvaro (2000) study.

Personal experiences may cause the past to feel close as well as distant. For example, revisiting a childhood haunt or attending a school reunion may pull ancient history back into the psychological present in much the same way as tasting the madeleine did for Proust (1934). Such enhanced feelings of closeness should make happy memories even more pleasurable and distressing events more disturbing.

In temporal self-appraisal theory, we focus on the self-esteem maintenance function of autobiographical memory, highlighting how people tend spontaneously to regard negative outcomes as more distant than positive episodes. People differ in the motivation to self-enhance, however, and variations in motivation should predict feelings of subjective distance. Individuals with high self-esteem are more inclined to engage in cognitive strategies that serve to maintain or enhance self-regard than are individuals with lower self-esteem (Ross & Wilson, 2002). Not surprisingly, then, people with high self-esteem are more likely than their low self-esteem counterparts to distance unflattering events and to feel close to praiseworthy episodes (Ross & Wilson, 2002). There may also be occasions, either due to individual differences or to the nature of an event, when individuals cannot help but feel psychologically close to threatening past experiences. Holman and Silver (1998) described how some people appear to become ''stuck in the past'', unable to put earlier traumas behind them. Similarly, Pillemer, Desrochers, and Ebanks (1998) reported that narrators sometimes spontaneously switch to the present tense when describing emotionally intense past incidents, perhaps ''reliving'' these earlier events whether they want to or not.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPORTANCE OF POINT OF VIEW

Nigro and Neisser (1983) reported that individuals visually recall memories from either a first-person or a third-person perspective. When adopting a first-person perspective, people perceive

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memories through their own eyes. When assuming a third-person perspective, individuals view their memories from the vantage point of an observer. The fundamental attribute of a third-person memory is that individuals can see themselves in the recollection.

Like subjective distance, point of view is a variable that relates to *how* people remember, rather than *what* they remember. Moreover, like subjective distance, point of view is associated with both actual temporal distance and the self-concept. Nigro and Neisser found that third-person memories tended to be older and less vivid than first-person memories. They also reported that memory perspective is malleable: participants were more likely to recall an episode from a first-person perspective when asked to focus on the *emotions* associated with an event rather than its *objective circumstances*. In an intriguing set of studies, Libby and Eibach (2002, Libby, Eibach, & Gilovich, 2002) recently related the visual perspective of autobiographical memories to the self-concept. Individuals were more likely to invoke a first-person perspective when recalling actions consistent with their current self-concept. For example, participants who were induced to feel religious (by means of a biased questionnaire) were highly likely to recall a religious memory from a first-person perspective. Participants who were encouraged to feel irreligious were significantly more likely to report that they viewed a religious memory from a third-person perspective (Libby & Eibach, 2002). In another study (Libby et al., 2002), participants were randomly assigned to recall the same episode from either a first-person or a third-person perspective. Participants who invoked a third-person perspective reported that they had changed more since the time of the episode. A third-person perspective seems to operate as a distancing mechanism, leading individuals to perceive that a past self is a different person from the current self.

Point of view can refer more generally to the degree to which individuals personalise a memory. People can think of a remembered event as occurring to themselves or they can remember the same episode as if it happened to someone else. Fergusson (1993) varied respondents' point of view in a study in which university students wrote about disturbing personal experiences. Previous work by Pennebaker and his associates (e.g., Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Pennebaker, Colder, & Sharp, 1990; Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1988a) has indicated that writing about disturbing events had health benefits, leading for example to fewer visits to physicians during subsequent months. However, the disclosure–health relationship has not been consistently obtained by other researchers, who have used methodologies similar to Pennebaker's (e.g., Greenberg & Stone, 1992; Murray, Lamnin, & Carver, 1989). Fergusson (1993) examined whether the benefits of disclosure would be enhanced if participants wrote in the third rather than the first person. In the third-person condition of her study, participants described their own distressing experiences, but they employed a pseudonym and the pronouns he or she. They thus wrote as if the distressing events had occurred to someone else. In the first-person condition, participants wrote about their upsetting experiences using the first-person pronoun. In the control conditions, participants wrote about trivial issues (e.g., their activities during the previous day or a description of their living accommodation) in either the third or first person.

Fergusson (1993) hypothesised that writing in the third person about negative, personally meaningful events would be especially beneficial because it circumvents people's tendencies to avoid dealing with traumatic events and, at the same time, serves a psychological distancing function that permits individuals to reframe, ''work through'', and ultimately leave painful experiences behind them. The research of Libby and Eibach on visual perspective suggests further that third-person narratives may be effective, in part, because they enable individuals to view negative experiences as occurring to a different self. As a result, the implication of those experiences for the current self is lessened. There are thus a variety of reasons for supposing that third-person writing could yield greater psychological and health benefits than first-person writing.

Fergusson assessed the effects of writing in a questionnaire completed 4 weeks following the final writing session. Third-person writers reported lower levels of distress associated with the events about which they wrote than did first-person writers. Third-person writers also reported a better understanding of the episodes. A subsequent examination of records obtained from the university health centre revealed additional benefits of third-person writing. Third-person writers made significantly fewer illness visits to the health centre than did first-person writers during the 50 days following the writing sessions, and marginally fewer visits than did control participants. Although the data are somewhat equivocal about

the value of writing about personally disturbing events, they do suggest that third-person writing is more beneficial than first-person writing.

Clinicians working with children have noted the advantage of encouraging their patients to distance themselves psychologically from distressing experiences (Bettelheim, 1979; Fergusson, 1993; Kalter, Schaeffer, Lesowitz, Alpern, & Pickar, 1988; Mishne, 1993). Lawrence (1990) proposed the use of ''third person analysis'' with adults. She suggested that a patient speaking in the third person is able to adopt ''a more dispassionate, detached, retrospective view of him/herself'' (p. 97). Lawrence claimed that, as a result, third-person analysis yields less guilt and fewer defensive justifications. The distancing of events in third-person accounts involves reducing the psychological threat of negative experiences, not forgetting or denying their occurrence. Distancing should thus be distinguished from the dissociation or repression of traumatic episodes, which may have very different psychological implications (e.g., Schacter, 1996; Terr, 1994).

The Ross and Wilson (2002) and Libby and Eibach (2002) findings suggest novel ways of assessing the effectiveness of therapeutic procedures. Successful therapy may lead individuals to view past disturbing episodes as subjectively distant and to adopt a third-person visual perspective when remembering the events. Such effects would provide evidence that individuals have successfully put disturbing incidents behind them.

MEMORIES ALTER CURRENT AFFECT AND LIFE SATISFACTION

Memories function to regulate people's emotion and their satisfaction with different aspects of their lives. As in research on distancing and point of view, it is not *what* individuals remember but *how* they remember that determines the direction of influence. Memories often have a direct effect: People's moods and reports of life satisfaction improve when they recall pleasant personal experiences and worsen when they remember distressing personal episodes (e.g., Martin, 1990; Salovey, 1992). However, sometimes a contrast effect occurs: A pleasant memory depresses and an unpleasant memory boosts people's current mood and life satisfaction (e.g., Nolen-Hoeksema, 1987; Strack, Strack, & Gschneidinger, 1985; Tversky & Griffin, 1991; Wilson, 2000). Clark, Collins, and Henry (1994) summarised circumstances that influence whether direct or contrast effects occur. They proposed that direct effects arise when respondents: (1) recall *how* an event happened, (2) recall an event in vivid detail, (3) ruminate upon an event, or (4) retrieve a *recent* past episode. Conversely, contrast effects occur when people: (1) recount *why* an event occurred, (2) recall an episode sketchily or briefly, (3) fail to ruminate upon an episode (or are distracted from it), or (4) retrieve an event from the *distant* past.

Although they focus on different manipulations and measures, Clark et al. (1994) describe effects that are similar to those obtained for manipulations of subjective distance and point of view. It may be that the same basic phenomenon underlies these various processes: Past episodes directly influence current self-appraisals when the episodes are ascribed to the present self or seen as *representative* of one's current life (Strack et al., 1985). Past outcomes either have no influence or a contrasting effect when dissociated from, or seen as unrepresentative of, the present self. One can accomplish this link or separation between the past and present by varying perceptions of distance or perspective, and by altering the qualities of the memory (e.g., its vividness).

These various memory processes are likely to be interrelated. Because people typically associate a third-person perspective with older memories (Nigro & Neisser, 1983), individuals who are induced to adopt a third-person perspective might feel farther from an episode than would individuals who remember the same event from a first-person perspective. Similarly, recall of recent events is typically more vivid and less abstract than recall of distant events (Semin & Smith, 1999). As a result of this common association, people may recall vivid, detailed memories in the first person and judge them to be recent (Brown et al., 1985). Rumination and rehearsal may serve to maintain memory vividness, and thereby induce both feelings of nearness and a first-person perspective. Many people may be more inclined to revisit and rehearse positive than negative events, both privately and in conversation with others. This differential rehearsal may cause flattering memories to be better remembered over time and contribute to the discrepancy in the subjective distance of positive and negative events. People who show a heightened tendency to ruminate about unflattering events—for example, individuals who are dysphoric (Nolen-Hoeksema & Morrow, 1991)—should be less likely to distance negative episodes. In one study of the effects of

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rehearsal, participants who were encouraged to ruminate about a negative event felt subjectively closer to it than did those who were distracted from the event (McLellan, Wilson & Ross, 2002). In addition, ruminators experienced more unpleasant affect about the event.

Individuals think about *why* an event occurs when they seek to understand an episode (Clark et al., 1994). People generally devote more conscious problem-solving resources as well as unconscious defensive processes to making sense out of distressing as opposed to favourable events (Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg, & Wheatley, 1998; Taylor, 1991). In fact if making sense of events helps individuals to put episodes behind them (Silver, Boon & Stones, 1983; Taylor, 1983; Weber, Harvey & Stanley, 1987), then people may prefer *not* to make sense of positive events. T. Wilson (2002) recently reported that people sometimes favour remaining uncertain or confused about positive events. The uncertainty keeps the event ''open'', and promotes longer-lasting positive affect.

REMEMBERING IS OFTEN A SOCIAL ACT

We have argued that one function of autobiographical memory is to maintain a favourable view of self. However, because autobiographical memory can serve multiple functions, there exists the potential for different memory goals to conflict. We have focused on the *intrapersonal* benefits of recalling the self as continually improving, as well as regarding failings as remote and glories as close. When recalled in conversation, these same memories may also serve *interpersonal* functions (e.g., Pasupathi, 2001). Just as other types of self-enhancement can have social costs as well as benefits (e.g., Paulhus, 1998), so too may self-serving remembering. Individuals may encounter some tension between their goal of achieving a preferred view of a former self and maintaining closeness and harmony in relationships with others. Consider a past conflict between intimate partners. The transgressor may quickly attribute the misconduct to an ''old me'' and claim that he or she has improved since the episode (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990; Cameron, Ross & Holmes, 2002). If the transgressor communicates this insight to the victim, a new conflict could ensue: Less motivated to distance the transgressor's behaviour, the victim may continue to hold the transgressor responsible for the misconduct and be less convinced of his or her metamorphosis (Baumeister et al., 1990; Cameron et al., 2002). More generally, claims of personal improvement that involve distancing past negative performances should often appear unfounded to an observer who is less motivated to distance the performer's objectionable actions. Assertions of subjective distance are especially likely to be challenged to the extent that the claims are at considerable variance with calendar time and imply major or improbable personal improvement.

In many cases, rememberers may be quite aware that their audience does not share their perceptions of change. For example, people may firmly believe that elements from their sordid pasts no longer reflect on the person they currently are, but may still keep their pasts secret because they are not confident that others will agree with their view of a changed self. Movie stars have often suppressed their embarrassing (or pornographic) early screen appearances, and President George W. Bush attempted to hide his arrest for driving under the influence even though he no longer drinks alcohol and regards himself as a changed man. Conversely, individuals who have experienced a religious conversion seem eager to describe how they have exchanged misguided and evil ways for a good and loving life (Ross & Konrath, in press). Proud and persuaded of their transformation, these individuals often don't hesitate to share it with others. They presumably suppose that they can convince others of the validity and wonder of their conversion.

Although we have emphasised the parallels between distancing and point of view, the implications of the two memory processes for social remembering are quite different. Point of view is a private experience. People typically don't tell others: ''Hmm I am seeing this memory from a first(third)-person point of view.'' Even if they did communicate their visual perspective, they are unlikely to arouse the ire of an audience. No one else can meaningfully disagree with a remember-er's point of view. A first-person or third-person point of view cannot be right or wrong and has no direct pejorative implications.

THE UTILITY AND VERITY OF PERSONAL MEMORIES

Neisser (1988) proposed that any act of remembering lies on a continuum between ''utility (using

the past to accomplish some present end) and verity (using memory to recapture what really happened in the past)'' (p.357). While not denying the importance of ''verity'', we have focused on the personal utility—or function—of memories in the current article. Identity construction is not a passive process. Individuals actively seek information that helps to confirm their desired self-views. Personal memory plays an important role in identity construction because it provides pertinent and plentiful information. Also because the past is ephemeral, there is often little concrete evidence to contradict individuals' versions of their personal histories (although accounts may be disputed when they are publicly shared). People can revise their appraisals of past selves and events, and shift the subjective distance, point of view, or way of recollecting the episodes. These revisions make it possible to use the richness of autobiographical memories, partly for their verity, but often for their utility in creating a preferred representation of self.

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