

**The social and cultural context of remembering: Implications for  
recalling childhood sexual abuse.**

Robyn Fivush<sup>1</sup> & Jo Saunders<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Psychology, Emory University

<sup>2</sup>School of Psychological Sciences and Health, University of Strathclyde

Address for Correspondence

Robyn Fivush

Department of Psychology

Emory University

Atlanta, GA 30322

Email: psyrf@emory.edu

Remembering is a social cultural activity. Contributors to this Special Issue were asked to address how conversations about personally experienced past events might or might not influence subsequent memory, especially in light of current controversies regarding historical memories of sexual abuse. For many years, the study of human memory focused on the individual engaging in a cognitive activity that produced a specific representation of a past event at a specific time point. But as the papers in this issue make clear, memory is an active ongoing social process that has cascading effects over time, an idea first developed by Bartlett (1932) and championed by Neisser (1982). Even when reminiscing to ourselves, there is an imagined audience, a way of expressing memories of our past selves to our current selves (Halbwachs, 1925/1952). What is remembered about any given event on any given day will depend on both the history of that memory, the specific local context within which the individual is remembering, and the larger sociocultural developmental history within which the individual is embedded (Nelson & Fivush, 2004). In this commentary, we pull the threads through these contributions, and discuss three major factors that contribute to remembering: language, emotion and time. These are, obviously, “big” constructs, but we try to weave together arguments and findings presented across the contributions to this issue. We end with some thoughts on what this might mean specifically for remembering childhood sexual abuse.

Both of the review pieces, by Fagin, Cyr and Hirst, and by Salmon and Reese, start from the now well-accepted assumption that memory is reconstructive. But

what exactly does this mean? We know that, although reconstructed, memories are also demonstrably accurate across large periods of time. Peterson's paper in this volume demonstrates remarkable accuracy and consistency across a 10 year period for a distinctive upsetting event experienced in early childhood, although, interestingly, less so for a less distinctive comparison event. Valentino and McDonnell, and Koppel and Berntsen, both review research on accuracy of especially traumatic memories in comparison to less emotional memories, again, across large swatches of time. But we also know that much of our experience is forgotten, an absolutely basic cognitive phenomenon, as pointed out by Bauer, and forgetting is accelerated in early childhood as compared to later childhood and adulthood. So memory is reconstructed from the bits and pieces of remembered detail over time (see Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000, and Rubin & Umanath, 2014, for full theoretical accounts of this process), and for some events there are more accurate details recalled than for other events. At the same time, over multiple rememberings, there are more opportunities for additional details, whether accurate or inaccurate, to become incorporated into subsequent memory, through various processes discussed across these papers, such as socially shared retrieval-induced forgetting (Fagin and colleagues.) social contagion (Koppel & Berntsen), verbal overshadowing (Barber), distracted listeners (Pasupathi & Oldroyd), and elaborated reminiscing (Salmon & Reese; Valentino & McDonnell). Both behavioral (Hirst & Manier, 2008) and neuroscience evidence (Dudai & Edelson, in press) demonstrates that each and every time we recall an experience to mind, it shapes

subsequent remembering, even if in subtle ways. Thus remembering is dynamic, offering opportunities to both strengthen and, perhaps, distort subsequent recalls.

Language is obviously key in this process. Sharing the events of our lives with others in everyday conversational interactions is ubiquitous. References to past experiences, whether of the previous day or the previous years, occur approximately every 5 minutes in everyday conversations (Bohanek, Fivush et al., 2009; Miller, 1994). As reviewed by Salmon and Reese, conversational reminiscing begins very early in development and sets the stage for individual trajectories of autobiographical memory. It is not just *that* we communicate with others about our past experiences, but *how* we communicate that matters. Parents who engage their children in highly elaborative reminiscing have children who develop more coherent and detailed personal memories. The sociocultural model of autobiographical memory development (Nelson & Fivush, 2004) posits that children internalize a more elaborative way of expressing and representing autobiographical experiences in general through interacting with more elaborative parental reminiscing. That is, language provides a generalized tool that allows for more elaborated encoding, representation and recall of personal experiences (Haden, Ornstein Eckerman & Didow, 2001). But as pointed out both in the Salmon and Reese review, and in Valentino and McDonell's commentary, parental elaborative style may also be event specific, and equally important may have different memorial consequences. Specific events talked about in specific ways predict specific memory consequences. Barber's discussion of the overshadowing literature is an excellent example of this; when we linguistically describe certain features in certain ways, it

changes our subsequent verbal and nonverbal memory of that detail, affecting what is remembered. So what might predict which events are talked about and in what ways?

Emotion is clearly a factor, both in which events we share with others and how we share them. By some estimates, upwards of 90% of our everyday emotional experiences are shared with others within 48 hours of their occurrence (Rime, 2007). Here we need to consider both the general emotional tone of the relationship, and the emotional valence of the events being shared. This raises the question of the functions of sharing the past. Why do we reminisce with others at all? Fagin and colleagues reference two basic functions for group reminiscing, epistemic, to understand the world, and relational, to affiliate with others. These are not mutually exclusive, and much of our reminiscing with others serves both functions simultaneously, and these functions may be related in specific ways to emotion. As discussed across the papers in this volume, reminiscing about positive shared events may serve a more affiliative function, whereas reminiscing about negative events may serve a more epistemic function. When bad things happen to us, we strive to understand them. But importantly, we also seek validation for our understanding of these difficult events, a more affiliative function. How we remember depends on who we are remembering with and for what purpose.

Both the epistemic and relational functions may lead us to reminisce differently with different people, especially people with whom we have different types of emotional relationships. In the developmental literature, this is often examined within the attachment relationship between mothers and children. The

reviews and commentators here show how mother-child dyads that have a secure attachment relationship reminisce in more elaborated ways, especially about difficult and negative experiences, and these conversations play an important role in how children come to understand and regulate their emotional experience. How this plays out developmentally is an intriguing question. Pasupathi and Oldroyd's data suggest that how others listen to us continues to matter into adulthood; if listeners are attentive and validating, or if they are distracted and uninterested, has substantial effects on subsequent memory. As Fagin and colleagues review further points out, when a group shares their experiences together, especially if they are an emotionally cohesive group, information not shared may be more prone to forgetting. So what is remembered is very much a function of the relationship among those doing the remembering.

And all of this happens over time, both time since the occurrence of the event being remembered and developmental time, the life course of the rememberer. Within the larger context of developmental change, Bauer provides powerful evidence that experiences that happen in early childhood are at greater risk of forgetting than experiences that happen later in life. Pairing this with Salmon and Reese's review, it highlights the prolonged possible effects of an elaborative maternal reminiscing style, a style that would continue to rehearse and strengthen memories in ways that might allow them to be retained across large developmental time spans. There is some evidence that more elaborative reminiscing during the preschool years is related to earlier age of first memory when these children grow into adolescence (Jack, McDonald, Reese & Hayne, 2009). Importantly, this

literature does not address accuracy. As discussed throughout these papers, in the process of reminiscing, memories are validated, negated, contested, negotiated, and overshadowed. But, as Peterson's data demonstrates, this does not always mean they will become inaccurate! Even ten years after an early childhood medical emergency, children recalled very accurate and complete details about the event. This is a "best case" scenario as described by Salmon and Reese. The event is not contested, there are not competing versions or interpretations. In this case, talking about the event has no effect on accuracy but rather may buffer against forgetting.

But time also provides an opportunity to re-evaluate and re-interpret events, especially for difficult experiences, in ways that may change how we remember it. This can occur in social interactions or in private reminiscing, including the kinds of intrusive memories described by Koppel and Berntsen. What is intriguing is that, as our interpretations of events may change, we may actually recall specific details differently as well. But again, these effects are modulated by the relationship quality within which we reminisce. As discussed by Fagin and colleagues, we are motivated to create a shared reality with people we identify with and are more likely to modify our own memories in this context than when engaging in shared reminiscing with people with whom we do not identify. Paradoxically, remembering within emotionally close relationships is more elaborated yet may also create more forgetting and/or distortion, as emotionally close groups may strive for a common understanding, a stable story that all members share.

This raises the issue of the larger cultural contexts within which individuals remember. There is substantial data that culture modulates the forms and functions of individual autobiography (Wang, 2013). Culturally defined schemas, or “master narratives” provide frameworks for how certain types of events should be remembered (McLean & Breen, in press). In studying memories of 9/11, Fagin and colleagues describe how these memories change quite dramatically over the first couple of years and then stabilize around a canonical narrative. This idea resonates with Koppel and Berntsen’s discussion of social contagion, although in a slightly different way; both propose that cultures may provide accepted frameworks for how to understand important public events that structure individual memory. These narrative frames provide an organization but also a specific type of evaluative framework for understanding how and why events occur as they do. Within any given culture, there may be dominant and resistant master narratives that allow voicing of some interpretations and silencing of others (Fivush, 2010). Thus how any given individual recalls an event may be shaped in both local social interactions and within larger cultural frameworks.

Recalling childhood sexual abuse is, as Salmon and Reese describe it, “the worst-case scenario”: early experiences, highly emotional and not discussed with others. As such they are likely subject to high rates of forgetting. But as highly emotional and personally significant events, they may be brought to mind involuntarily quite frequently, as described by Koppel and Bernsten. And, importantly, the sociocultural context has changed. Although most survivors still feel silenced and do not disclose during childhood (Pipe, Lamb, Orbach & Cederberg,

2013), since the second wave of the women's movement there is more acknowledgment of the prevalence of childhood sexual abuse (Enns, McNeilly, Corkery & Gilbert, 1995). There has arisen a "master narrative" of childhood sexual abuse, and, indeed, more and more adult survivors are engaging in public social media forums discussing these issues. This has the positive effect of bringing to light these horrific experiences, but can inadvertently change the way individuals recall their own experiences as they hear about others, and possibly conform their own memories to the cultural norms (Lonne & Parton, 2014).

As discussed throughout this volume, none of our memories are pristine: memories are hostage to people willing to listen and validate, and in this process, may evolve to include details not actually experienced. Voicing our experience is a two-edged sword: it may validate our sense of self, but inadvertently, alter our memories. What the papers in this volume have helped us understand is how language, emotion, and time can shape our memories in ways that both preserve and distort accuracy, and these processes must be considered at the level of the specific memory, the individual who is remembering, and the sociocultural context in which the individual and the individual memory live.

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