

## Salient Childhood Memories

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**ABSTRACT.** There has been little empirical research on adults' memories of important events from childhood. In the present paper, 50 college students were asked to summarize one of their earliest memories that had a strong emotional impact. The memories they reported were found to include a rich variety of themes. Interestingly, almost all of the memories reported were unhappy ones. Moreover, there were significant sex differences, both in the types of theme included and in the estimated ages at which the recalled events had occurred. The results suggest that negative affect may organize and preserve memory for certain aspects of childhood events.

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A POTENTIALLY IMPORTANT FACTOR in human personality formation is the fate of childhood events in memory. It is clear that most people experience some amount of "childhood amnesia," the inability to fully recall childhood events. Scheingold and Tenney (6) tested children's and adults' recall of an important and in part verifiable event (the birth of a sibling) and found that the *S*'s age during memory encoding was the primary parameter for recall, rather than the age at recall or the time elapsed since the event. Two main types of explanation of childhood amnesia have been advanced, both of which are compatible with Scheingold and Tenney's findings: that many early events are painful to remember in light of later emotional development and are therefore repressed (3) and, alternatively, that young children's encoding of events is incompatible with adults' cognitive schemata (5). White and Pillemer (8) maintain that an intermediate (and presumably preferable) position can be found in many of

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Freud's writings: that early experiences leave disconnected traces that are later reinterpreted in terms of adult schemata, resulting in coherent narrative memories, but that the emotional components of traumatic memories often are repressed. There is, as yet, no generally agreed upon theory of the formation and fate of early memories.

Analyses of childhood memories have focused primarily upon the difficulty of retrieving certain events. Additional understanding of the encoding of memories might be gained with a corpus focusing upon those events that *S*'s find to be *most* memorable. Prior collections of childhood memories indicate that many early memories have an emotional content (7), and some of these emotional memories obviously might be among the most retrievable. Because of these considerations, the present study examines detailed descriptions of early emotional memories. Regardless of the veracity or origin of these memories (e.g., encoding at the time of the event vs subsequent modification of the memory), they may be important indices of the issues that people confront during childhood and later incorporate into a self-concept.

### Method

The *Ss* were 49 students in developmental psychology classes (18 male, 31 female), predominantly sophomores, with an age range of 17–36 years. An additional *S* had experienced sexual abuse at age 10 and did not permit us to include his response.

*Ss* were asked to answer the following essay questions as part of their classwork:

Describe in *careful detail* one of your earliest memories in which you had a strong emotional reaction to another human being. Describe the emotion directly, as well as defining it by the situation that led to that emotion. Additionally, mention any aspects of the situation that seem vague, odd, or incompletely remembered.

Each *S* also estimated the age or age range at which the event occurred.

### Results

We wished to classify memories in a way that would reflect major emotional/social developmental themes (e.g., 2) but would be simple enough to use reliably as a basis of classification. It was determined that most memories focused on one of two main themes: *attachment* issues (e.g., security in the affections of loved ones, approval of teacher or peers, and temporary or permanent separation) or *competence* issues (e.g., the ability to perform age-appropriate skills, competition and performance in school, personal achievements, identity as a success or failure). Both authors independently

judged each essay as predominantly concerned with attachment or with competence, and an interrater agreement of .80 was obtained. However, some of the essays did not truly belong to either category. Therefore, both authors also judged each report either as fitting the attachment/competence categorization or as not fitting that classification. For 30 cases that we both judged to fit the categorization, the reliability was .93. The remaining 19 cases (i.e., those that did not fit the categorization as well) were found to involve either physical safety (e.g., an attack by a dog; belief in an imaginary, omniscient "toilet monster" that ingested children, invented by a camp counselor; exposure to soldiers with guns), morality (e.g., a shoplifting incident and a boy's feeling of guilt for failing to protect his brother from injury), or some combination of attachment and competence issues (e.g., a father's failure to protect his daughter from an unwanted request to play her violin, the refusal of a friend to help a boy cheat on his exam and a young boy's success at warding off a girl who wanted to kiss him).

Each *S* offered either an age or an age range during which the remembered event was thought to occur. It was possible to classify memories as occurring roughly before school age or within the school years. The actual ages of school entry were not known, but an age-based approximation was used: Memories were separated into those thought to occur at 5; 11 or earlier vs 6; 0 or later. (No *S*'s estimate spanned these ages.) With the use of classification, it was found that 17 of 31 female *S*s' estimates fell into the earlier period, but only five of 18 male *S*s' estimates fell into this period. There were significantly more females with estimates in the earlier period,  $\chi^2_{(1)} = 4.11, p < .05$ . The median age was 5.5 years for females and 7 years for males, and the modal age was 5 years for females and 8 years for males.

Table 1 shows the percentage of males and females whose estimated ages during the remembered event fell in the early (< 6 years) vs late ( $\geq 6$  years) period, divided into competence-oriented, attachment-oriented, and ambiguous themes. A memory was considered ambiguous if the two judges disagreed about its classification or if either judge thought it did not fit the attachment/competence dichotomization. This table shows that for memories with both earlier and later estimated ages, men were more likely to remember competence issues, and women, attachment issues. In all, men provided seven unambiguous competence memories and only two unambiguous attachment memories. In comparison, women provided four competence memories and 15 attachment memories. Because the expected frequencies were too small to use a chi-square test, this sex difference in competence vs attachment was evaluated with a contingency test based on the hypergeometric distribution (4) and was found to be significant,  $p < .01$ . The same probability level was obtained when the test included 11 ambiguous cases in which the two judges did not think the example fit the attachment/competence classification, but in which they nevertheless made

the same initial attachment/competence judgment. There was also a tendency, although not significant, for attachment issues to be associated with an earlier estimated age than competence issues (Table 1).

Each response was also judged predominantly positive or predominantly negative in the affect described (rater reliability:  $48/49 = .98$ ). All but three of the responses were judged to describe primarily negative emotions ( $p < .001$ , sign test). There were two responses judged positive: a memory describing a close game in which a 4-year-old girl "molded" the father's face, and a memory of a 3- to 4-year-old boy's success in stopping an elevator with his foot without getting hurt. The *S* for whom the raters disagreed recounted being "mugged" by several other boys at age 12 but went on to describe his ultimately increased sense of security following martial arts classes.

We also examined the frequency of appearance in the accounts of people who had various relationships to the subject (e.g., parents, siblings, peers, or strangers). There were no clear differences in the particular relations present as a function of the estimated age at the time of the remembered event. Moreover, men and women had similar frequencies of relations. For example, the percentages of men mentioning father, mother, same- and opposite-sex peer, same- and opposite-sex sibling, and a teacher were 21, 23, 15, 8, 3, 5, and 8 percent, respectively, and for women the values were similar: 21, 33, 13, 7, 3, 3, and 9 percent.

Eight *S*s explicitly mentioned gaps in their memories. These gaps never involved the failure to recall a feeling; all involved the recollection of feelings in the absence of recall of the physical events relevant to the feelings. For example, the female who recalled that a relative made an unwanted request for her to play her violin remembered the feelings of resentment and of betrayal by her father, but did not recall whether or not she complied with the request. A male who was repeatedly beaten by an uncle who was his caretaker at the estimated age of seven years only dimly recalled the period, and even had forgotten the uncle's name. Another male had encountered soldiers with guns when he was about 10 years old, but recently found out that his recollection of the traumatic events had been greatly exaggerated.

One cannot help but be impressed by the variety of types of experience that *S*'s reported. Nevertheless, attachment-related and competence-related memories could be further categorized. For memories initially judged attachment-related by both judges, subcategories included long- or short-term separation (five examples), illness of a loved one (three examples), betrayal by a friend or loved one (four examples), emotional injury caused by a friend or loved one (five examples), anger or argument (three examples), unwanted affection from a child of the opposite sex (two examples), and an exchange of affection (one example). Subcategories of competence included feelings of inferiority or insecurity about schoolwork

**TABLE 1**  
**Percentage Distribution Among Content Categories of Males' and Females'**  
**Memories From Two Estimated Age Ranges**

Estimated age range	Primary content of memory			Total	
	Competence	Attachment	Ambiguous <sup>a</sup>		
<i>Male</i>					
< 6 years	16.7	11.1	0.0	27.8	
≥ 6 years	38.9	11.1	22.2	72.2	
Total	55.6	22.2	22.2	100.0	(n = 18)
<i>Female</i>					
< 6 years	9.7	35.5	9.7	54.8	
≥ 6 years	9.7	25.8	9.7	45.2	
Total	19.4	61.3	19.4	100.0	(n = 31)

*Note.* Numbers refer to percentages out of all male or female Ss in the sample.

<sup>a</sup>A response was labeled "ambiguous" if the judges disagreed on the competence/attachment classification or if either judge decided that the response did not fit the classification well.

(five examples), or about the ability to memorize important information (two examples), or about athletic abilities (four examples) and concern with other physical abilities (five examples, including fear of clumsiness and concern with becoming toilet trained). Of the 10 remaining memories, on which the judges disagreed in the initial competence/performance classification, four involved personal safety, and the other six involved combinations of emotions already discussed. The most distinct among these was a woman's memory of being upset when her preschool teacher did not allow her to take the mother's role while "playing house," and another's memory as a very young child of temporary separation from her parents when they drifted down an escalator without her. These were written so as to emphasize both attachment and competence issues.

### Discussion

Perhaps most striking among the present findings is the fact that most of the memories were unhappy ones, in contrast to earlier work, which found a more even distribution of positive and negative recollections or even a predominance of positive memories (e.g., 1, 7). The emphasis on negative affect was probably not transmitted through the child development course from which the present S sample was drawn (e.g., the course stressed normal development rather than psychopathology). Rather, this emphasis may have been due to the request for highly emotional memories. Unhappy

memories may be marked by more specific and unusual circumstances than happy memories and consequently may be of greater salience for later retrieval. Additionally, children may rehearse and mentally elaborate unusually negative memories more than positive memories. The preservation of unhappy childhood memories may serve an adaptive function, permitting the child to devise means to avoid repetitions of unhappy situations.

The responses of eight Ss demonstrated that it is possible to recall a strong emotion and the circumstances that surrounded it without recalling other important circumstances, such as the outcome of the situation. This could indicate a type of repression. Alternatively, though, it is possible that the emotion interfered with further encoding, or that several events with slightly different particulars were condensed into a single memory. In any case, the aspects of events thought to have been forgotten apparently were not the aspects that provoked the strong emotion in the first place. Specifically, no Ss reported a strong feeling that seemed in any way curious or inadequately motivated by the facts recounted. This result, along with the fact that most memories were unhappy ones, suggests that strong negative affect often may serve to *increase* the retrievability of some associated memories rather than producing repression. Of course, this finding does not rule out the possibility of repression, but it does argue against a strong version of repression theory stating that unhappy early memories should be much less accessible than happy memories.

Two important sex differences were obtained in the present study. The first, a tendency for women to recall earlier events than men, has been reported by previous investigators also (1, 7). The second, a tendency for women more often to recall attachment-related events but for men to recall competence-related events, has not been reported. A search for the explanation of such sex differences would prove to be of use also in understanding the basic mechanisms of memory. It may be that the sex differences were established at the time of memory encoding. For example, female children may be more concerned with events that threaten attachment, and male children, events that threaten competence. Alternatively, sex differences may emerge only at the time of retrieval. Women may in retrospect identify more with attachment-related events of childhood, and men with competence-related events. Finally, the sex difference in estimated age of memory could be due to differences in the development of encoding processes such as verbal elaboration but alternatively could arise as a consequence of the different ages at which attachment- vs competence-related crises most commonly occur.

The present paper thus examined a new class of childhood memory through a modification of previous methods. As a result of obtaining and coding detailed descriptions of childhood events that Ss viewed as among their most important emotionally, a consistent pattern of responses emerged,

which suggested that emotion may serve an organizing function for long-term memory of childhood events.

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*Received May 18, 1983*