FIRST MEMORIES ARE NONVERBAL AND EMOTIONAL, NOT NECESSARILY TALKED ABOUT OR PART OF A RECURRING PATTERN

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Summary.—Nelson (1993) hypothesized that children must learn to verbalize their memories to retrieve them. Their parents talk with them about the experiences thereby influencing what is recalled. Further, recurrence of events indicates their importance and aids recall. To test these hypotheses, 83 students were asked to recall their first memory and indicate whether they recalled it verbally or nonverbally, had talked or been told about it, and whether it involved recurring events. They also were asked whether the memory involved emotions, because emotionality may enhance recall. Analysis showed that 94% of first memories were nonverbal and 92% involved an emotional event, but only 45% had been talked about and 55% were part of a recurring pattern. Research into nonverbal, first memories of adjusted individuals is needed to understand memory better and to have a comparison for what is recalled in therapy, in lawsuits involving child abuse, etc.

Nelson (1993) suggested that early memories are not recalled, because language is needed to encode them in retrievable form. She suggested that events are talked about with parents who, as a result, play an active role in formulating their children's memories. She further indicated that recurrence of an event is interpreted as importance and supports memory of the event. To test these hypotheses, college students were asked to recall a very first memory and to indicate whether they recalled it in words or nonverbally, whether they had talked or been told about it by parents, and whether the memory was part of a repeated pattern or theme in their lives. Students also were asked whether the memory included emotions, because emotions have been reported to enhance memory (Heuer & Reisberg, 1990).

Method
At a 4-yr. university in the Midwest, 83 students (M age = 23.0 yr., SD = 5.3) enrolled in one of two junior classes anonymously recalled a first memory. They were told truthfully that this was voluntary and in preparation for discussing the nature of childhood memories. Subjects were 70 Caucasians, 11 African-Americans, one Native American, and one Asian-American. They were asked to indicate whether they recalled the memory in words or nonverbally, whether they had talked or been told about it by their parents, whether the memory was part of a recurring pattern or theme in
their lives, and whether the memory included emotions. They also were asked their current age and how old they were at the time of the memory.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The average age of the first memory was the same as that reported by Nelson (1993). Fifty-eight (70%) estimated their ages to be between 2 and 4 years; 19 (23%) estimated between 2 and 3 years old, and 39 (47%) between 3 and 4 years.

Seventy-eight (94%) reported that the first memory was nonverbal; one said it was verbal, and four (5%) said it was both; see Table 1. Forty-six (55%) did not talk about the remembered event with a parent; 34 (41%) talked about it on more than one occasion; one talked about it only immediately following the event but not thereafter; one talked about it much later with the parents, and yet another did not as much talk about it with parents as look at pictures about it with the parents. Among those who shared the memory with parents, the entire range of parental involvement was represented, from telling a child about events through filling in details of events the child recalled, to being astonished by what the child could recall. Failure to share the memory with parents was sometimes motivated by fear, for example, the memory of needing to hide to avoid an abusing parent, but more frequently the memory involved a person other than a parent or a situation other than at home, for example, getting gum stuck in hair at a neighbor's house. Most recalled using pictures or movements. Only one recalled a memory associated with and intermittently triggered by an odor, even though odors can be excellent triggers of memories (Cann & Ross, 1989).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1</th>
<th>CHARACTERISTICS OF 83 COLLEGE STUDENTS' FIRST MEMORY</th>
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<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
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<tr>
<td>Memory is nonverbal</td>
<td>94</td>
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<tr>
<td>Memory involves an emotional event</td>
<td>92</td>
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<tr>
<td>Talked about the memory</td>
<td>45</td>
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<tr>
<td>Memory is part of a recurrent pattern or theme in the person's life</td>
<td>55</td>
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The hypothesis that children learn to express their memories verbally so they can be retrieved and shared was not supported. In fact, some students reported that as they thought about the images, many more images started to occur to them and some of these were incomplete. It may be that, if we expect recall to consist of a complete and verbal narrative, memories will not be reported or will be distorted. This hypothesis needs to be tested.

Seventy-six (92%) reported that the memory included emotions. However, three of the individuals who indicated that their memories involved no emotion were in situations others would describe as emotional: one indicated
that the first memory was of their cart getting stuck in the mud in a busy street; another indicated arriving at the house where they were to live after moving a considerable distance; and a third indicated being dressed for the first day of preschool in matching shorts and shirt. Could early memories be more concerned with content and be devoid of the self-reflection required to know one's emotional state? If so, emotionality enhances encoding, as has been reported before (Heuer & Reisberg, 1990), but not self-awareness. This hypothesis too needs to be tested.

Forty-six (55%) indicated that the memory involved a repetitive pattern. Sometimes a nonrepetitive event was traumatic, such as being stuck under water, but to many others it was not clear why they remembered what they did.

In summary, this study suggests that first memories are not necessarily verbal or shared. Most are nonverbal, emotional, and may be partial. The person may not know why it is remembered. It may be that earlier memories can be retrieved if the criteria of completeness, rationality, and verbal report are removed, for example, by using art therapy strategies. Research into first memories of adjusted men and women is needed to provide information about first memories, including possible sex differences, and to establish a comparison for recall in therapy, or for childhood abuse in legal cases (Loftus, 1993), etc.

REFERENCES


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