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# Does manipulating age in earliest memories affect narratives more than snapshots?

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## Introduction

- Adults' relative inability to recall early childhood experiences is referred to as **childhood amnesia**.
- It is generally assumed that age estimates of early memories are **accurate**, with an average age of 3.5 years (Wang & Peterson, 2014).
- Yet, estimating age may be a **reconstructive process** depending on context. Previous work shows that age-information in the experimental set-up affects reported age (e.g., Kingo, Bohn & Krøjgaard, 2013)
- Especially **narrative memories** may be sensitive to age information (Wessel, Schweig & Huntjens, 2016).

## Narrative vs snapshot memories



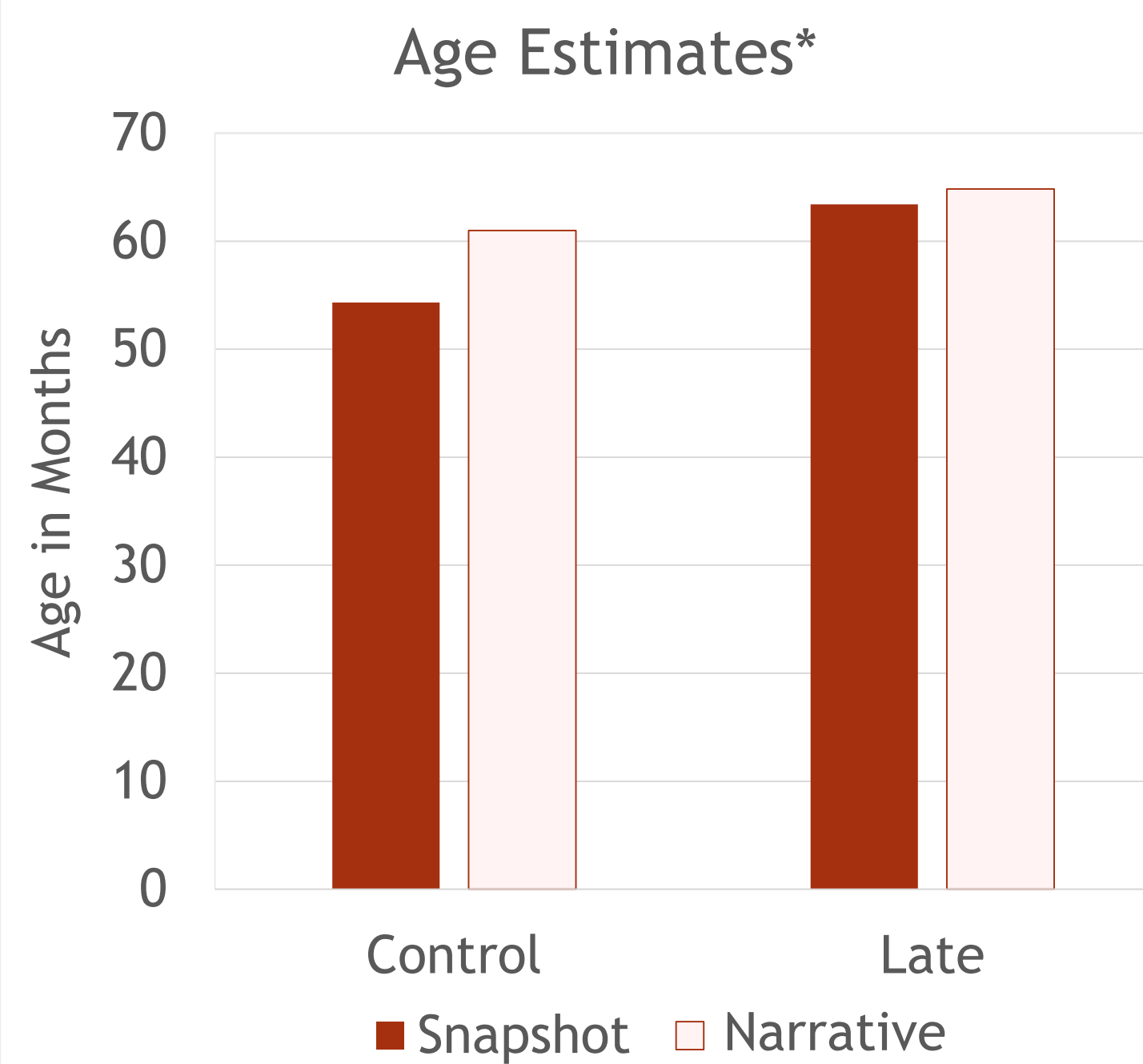
**Narrative** memories have a **story-like** structure, with a beginning and an end and a sequence of events in temporal order.



**Fragment / Snapshot** memories are **isolated** scenes, decontextualized pieces of information, without a temporal order.

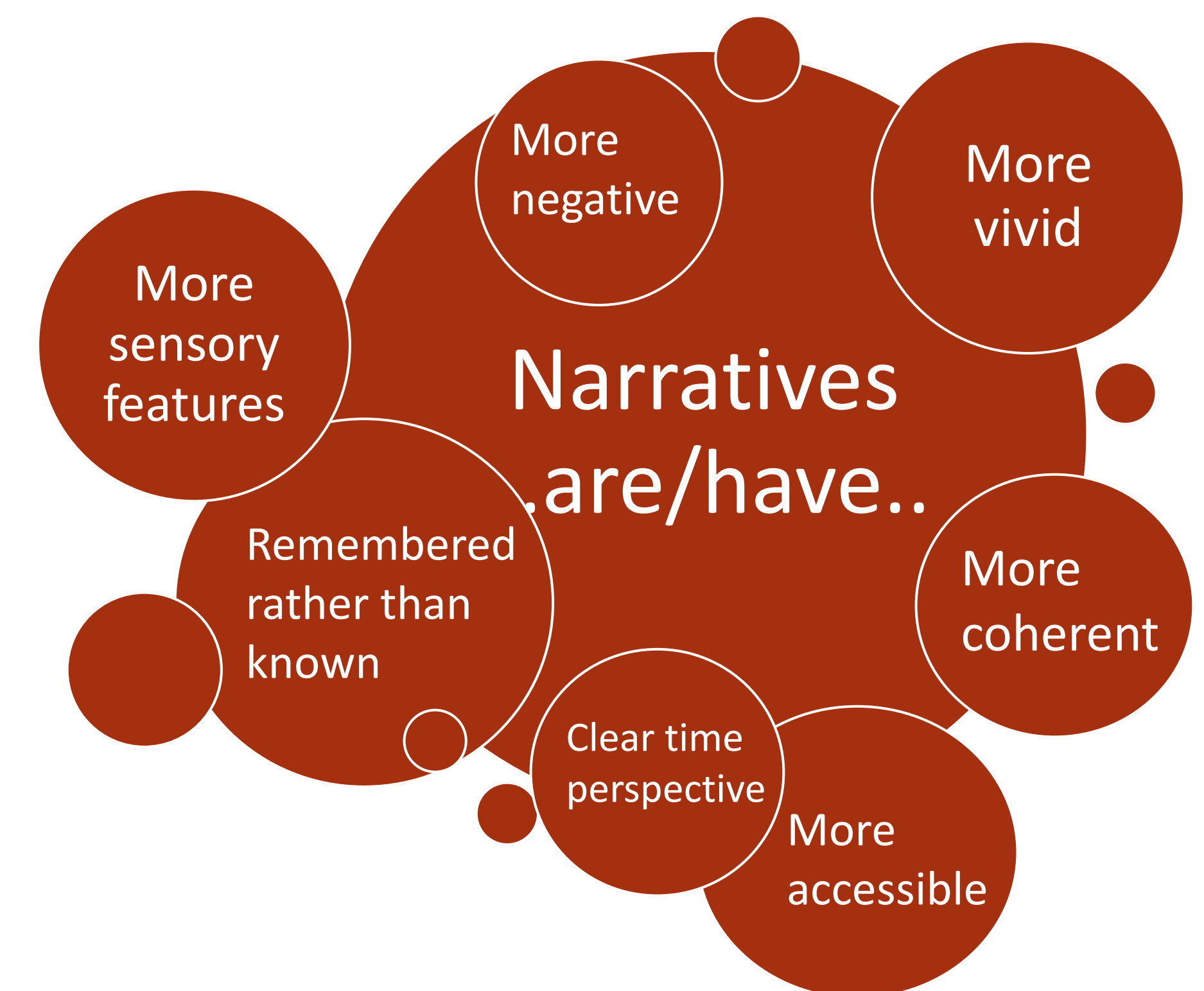
(Cf. Bruce et al., 2005)

## Results



- The late condition reported higher age estimates than the control condition ( $F(1, 356) = 12.70, p < .001, \eta p^2 = .035$ ).
- The narrative condition reported higher age estimates than the snapshot condition ( $F(1, 356) = 4.94, p = .027, \eta p^2 = .014$ ).
- No significant interaction emerged ( $F(1, 356) = 2.07, p = .151, \eta p^2 = .006$ ).
- An analysis limited to memories that were snapshots or narratives according to **experimenter ratings** yielded similar results.

## Compared to snapshots...



\* Students who learned their age from an external source (e.g., parents, photos) were excluded from the age estimate analysis, leaving  $n = 357$ .

## Aims

- Replicate Wessel et al.'s (2016, study 1) finding that a late age prime renders higher ages in earliest narrative memories than in snapshots
- Explore how narrative and snapshot memories differ in terms of autobiographical memory characteristics

## Method

**Participants:** 465 college and university students with a Western cultural background

**Design:** 2 (age prime) x 2 (memory type), between participants

**Material:** Online Questionnaire

- Primes were vignettes, containing
  - Age 6-8 (Late) or no age (Control)
  - A fragment/snapshot or narrative structure
- Describe earliest fragment or narrative memory
- Date memory
- Memory Experiences Questionnaire – Short form (MEQ-sf; Luchetti & Sutin, 2016) plus additional characteristics (Bruce et al., 2005)

## Primes- Examples



### Late / Narrative:

*I remember myself being in the pool with my dad. We went down the waterslide together. We went really fast. I really liked it and we must have gone down the slide ten times or more. Afterwards we played with a ball. My mum was there too. I wasn't wearing any floaties, so I must have been seven or eight years old. I still like going to the pool.*

### Control / Snapshot:

*I remember myself being on top of a waterslide. Someone else was there but I can't remember who it was. The slide was white and green and there were bright lights around us. There were big glass windows, so it must have been an indoor pool. I don't know which swimming pool it was.*

## Conclusions

- Including a relatively **late age** in the instructions for retrieving an earliest memory rendered **higher age estimates** than no age information (cf. Wessel et al., 2016).
- Age in **snapshot memories** was **younger** than in narrative memories (cf. Bruce et al., 2005).
- Contrary to earlier findings (Wessel et al., 2016) the present findings suggest that age primes do **not differentially affect** age estimates in snapshots and narratives.
- Narrative memories differed from snapshot memories on the **majority of characteristics** as measured by the MEQ. The memory types did not differ with respect to intensity of emotion, duration, rehearsal and observer/field perspective.
- All in all, the results add to the evidence that the estimated age in memories of early childhood experiences can be affected by external circumstances. This has implications for **legal cases** in which early childhood memories play a role.

## Literature

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