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Target article: Mahr & Csibra

Abstract: 60 words
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False memories, nonbelieved memories, and the unresolved primacy of communication

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Abstract

Mahr and Csibra make a compelling case for a communicative function of episodic remembering, but a less compelling case that this is its *primary* function. Questions arise on whether confirming their predictions would support their account sufficiently, on the communicative function of preserving rich nonbelieved memories, and on the epistemic benefits of developing false memories via the acceptance of misinformation.

The target article contributes appreciably to the established literature exploring the social functions—among other functions—of accurate and inaccurate remembering (Bluck, Alea, Habermas, & Rubin, 2005; Newman & Lindsay, 2009). Mahr and Csibra (M&C) prompt us to rethink our conception of these social functions; specifically, they propose that remembering is adaptive primarily because communicating our memories can lead others to share our beliefs. The case for this communicative function is compelling, and M&C's account lays the ground for interesting new directions in empirical research, requiring novel methodological paradigms. But the case for the primacy of this function over other functions is currently unresolved.

What kinds of empirical evidence would strongly support or falsify the primacy of communication? M&C make some reasonable predictions, but support for these can arguably only bolster confidence in the existence of a communicative function, not provide evidence of its primacy. For instance, the authors predict that people should engage in more conservative, effortful source monitoring whenever a prospective listener is likely to be skeptical. This prediction seems complementary to the literature demonstrating 'audience-tuning' effects on remembering (Echterhoff, Higgins, Kopietz, & Groll, 2008); more generally there is broad agreement that metacognition is strategic and goal-driven (Johnson, Hashtroudi, & Lindsay, 1993; Koriat & Goldsmith, 1996), and influenced by similar processes as is social persuasion (Blank, 2009; Leding, 2012; Nash, Wheeler, & Hope, 2015). But does this broad agreement confirm that episodic remembering must primarily serve communication? Not at all. Indeed, although communicative goals undoubtedly can motivate source monitoring, these goals do not necessarily take precedent over other self-serving goals. When a skeptic challenges the authority of our memories, for example, we seem in fact to systematically prefer cheap-and-

easy strategies, not reliable strategies, for verifying the truth (Nash, Wade, Garry, & Adelman, in press; Wade, Nash, & Garry, 2014).

Additional questions arise when we stay on the matter of people disputing their own memories. M&C emphasize that believing in an event's occurrence does not necessarily imply remembering the event; however, they omit to note that the converse is also true. That is to say, people frequently retain episodic memories of events that they no longer believe truly occurred (Clark, Nash, Fincham, & Mazzoni, 2012; Mazzoni, Scoboria, & Harvey, 2010; Otgaar, Scoboria, & Smeets, 2013; Scoboria, Nash, & Mazzoni, in press). Importantly, these so-called *nonbelieved memories* often retain the rich, autonoetic phenomenology that typifies believed memories. Our ability to preserve these memories could be adaptive, given that our reasons for disbelieving any particular memory may themselves transpire to be misguided (Scoboria et al., 2014). But the existence and characteristics of nonbelieved memories must nevertheless tell us that autonoesis is more than simply "a proposition to the effect of 'I had these experiences'" (M&C, p.12), and that episodic remembering cannot, by necessity, be epistemically generative. M&C must account for the durability of autonoesis in cases where a remembered event is not believed to have occurred.

Although M&C do not discuss nonbelieved memories, they do give greater attention to the adaptiveness of false memories. Susceptibility to false memories might offer numerous specific benefits to the rememberer (Bernstein & Loftus, 2009; Howe, 2011; Nash, Berkowitz, & Roche, 2016), but M&C propose that this susceptibility is also generally adaptive, because convincing ourselves of self-serving beliefs is an essential first step toward convincing others. They further propose a reciprocal benefit: adopting other people's beliefs

into our own recollections can be "communicatively useful" as a means of enhancing our epistemic authority. Both of these proposals warrant scrutiny.

First, is the adaptiveness of (false) remembering really contingent on whether or not we communicate our memories to others? Many examples of self-serving memories give cause for doubt: remembering plays well-documented roles in identity formation and maintenance, for instance, and so establishing positive self-regard—even if based on false beliefs—can provide important benefits to wellbeing (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Wilson & Ross, 2003). Episodic remembering enables us to generate and preserve self-serving beliefs about our own past such as these, and also to generate the same self-serving beliefs in other people. But it seems counterintuitive to imply that the adaptive benefit of having others share our self-serving beliefs must be greater than the adaptive benefit of us holding those beliefs ourselves.

Second, does altering our memories to accord with another person's memories really afford greater epistemic authority? Suppose that Doris and Jack observe a theft, and Doris later claims that the thief had red hair, whereas Jack cannot recall the thief's hair. M&C correctly note that people typically treat the richness and detail in others' memory reports as signals of epistemic authority (Bell & Loftus, 1989); the authors therefore suggest that Jack could become an ostensibly more authoritative source by integrating detail from Doris's memory into his own. Yet M&C might have equally noted that people are persuaded by good calibration: we trust witnesses who realize what they remember poorly, as well as what they remember well (Tenney, MacCoun, Spellman, & Hastie, 2007). In this sense, even patchy memories—not only detailed memories—can signal epistemic authority. This interpretation makes it more difficult to construe misinformation acceptance as necessarily adaptive: Jack

could gain greater authority as a witness precisely *because* rather than accepting the misinformation, he maintains that he cannot remember the thief's hair. Moreover, the benefit of accepting misinformation is even less clear in cases where memories are altered, rather than supplemented. Suppose that Jack initially recalls that the thief's hair was brown, but nevertheless alters his recollection to accord with Doris's (red hair). Here, Jack's testimony neither becomes more detailed as a result of accepting the misinformation, nor necessarily becomes better calibrated. Once again, false remembering is unlikely to systematically enhance epistemic authority.

On the whole, M&C position their communicative account of remembering as a challenger to popular "mental time travel" accounts, raising astute questions that cast doubt on whether remembering evolved primarily to serve future planning. But before resolving, instead, that remembering evolved primarily to serve communication, M&C too have critical questions to answer.

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