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Dynamics of Autonomy and Relatedness across Lifespan in Autobiographical Narratives: Semantic and Susceptibility

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Abstract

This paper presents two studies. The first study was designed to determine whether expressions of autonomy and relatedness in autobiographical narrative vary by age of memories and by (sub) cultural specificity within one (Russian) language sample. In the first study, 40 older women were asked to tell “the story of life”. Half of the participants had lived their lives in rural areas of Russia and half were life-long city dwellers. Verbal markers of autonomy and relatedness were coded we have found that they are represented in narratives dynamically. In the rural sample in contrast with the rest of their past participants recollected their childhood and old age as individualistic. In the urban sample in contrast with the rest of their past participants recollected their childhood as collectivistic. To examine what happens to early memories if a person changes cultural context in youth we carried out the second study. We interviewed 20 old female participants who were born in village and moved into big city about 18-20 y.o. They experienced their childhood as rural subjects but recollected it as urban subjects. It supports the main view on constructive nature of autobiographical memory, which reshapes distant memories in accordance with working self’s values.

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1. Introduction.

Different cultures have specific sets of requirements for personality. Among numerous cultural differences the following considered to be the most fundamental: collectivism / individualism; autonomy / relatedness; independence / interdependence [1], [2], [3]. Generally members of collectivistic societies perceive themselves as a part of a group and they maintain a conceptual self interdependent and that displays a low level of autonomy. In contrast, members of individualistic societies view themselves as independent and focus on an autonomous self-

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concept [4]. The influence of culture on self-conception formation is not direct. For a child, culture does not exist as an abstract semiotic system of values, schemata, scripts, models, metaphors, and artifacts. Rather, culture is internalized by participating in symbolically mediated rituals, daily routines, and other practices. The most powerful social practice involved in establishing a self-conception is collaborative reminiscing. Fivish and Nelson [5] posited that the self-conception first appears when children reminisce and continues to show develop as children age and their narrative skill increase.

The core function of autobiographical memory is to form a “database” for coherent self-consciousness over time (self-function, [6]). Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that autobiographical memory is not natural. Instead, it is shaped in accord with dominant cultural values through socialization practices. When reminiscing in collaboration with their children, mothers in individualistic societies emphasize the unique individual and focus on the child’s agency, whereas, mothers in collectivistic societies typically discuss social interactions and social norms [7]. In this way, parents transfer culturally specific norms to their children; these norms outline the way that children are expected to remember their lives and, hence, how they should understand themselves and live their lives in accord with cultural expectations. In other words, one of the main outcomes of intergenerational transmission of autobiographical memory is the reproduction of a culturally dominant personality type.

Though there is a vast literature on cross-cultural differences in self-conception and autobiographical memory, main issues remain. In this paper, we will focus on two of them. First, are cultural values (e.g., collectivism vs individualism) uniform across the life span within a single culture? Second, what happens when a person changes his or her cultural context in youth? Does s/he recollect a distant personal past as s/he experienced it or in a way that is consistent with a new cultural context?

2. Cultural differences in autobiographical memory.

There is good evidence that content of autobiographical memory reflects, in part, an individual’s culturally-determined orientation. For example, when asked about their earliest memories, Americans reported self-focused memories, while Chinese reported memories centering on collective activities and general routines [8]. Likewise, a content analysis of personal-event memories indicated that participants raised in the United States reported twice many self-focused memories as participants raised in Chinese and that the Chinese were the opposite pattern obtained for memories dealing with social interactions and group activities [9]. Furthermore, an examination of self-defining memories (memories of events those an individual believes shapes his/her personality) indicated that that Australians and Germans generally recalled autonomous events and that the Chinese, Japanese, Taiwanese, Korean and Indian generally recalled relatedness events [10], [11]. All studies mentioned above concluded that autobiographical memories of separate episodes directly reflect culturally dominant self-focus (the relatedness-self for people originated from collectivistic societies and the autonomously-self for people originated from individualistic societies). Is this this also trues for complete autobiographical narratives? If so, does the semantic representation of recollections from different times in a person’s life also track the level of collectivism and individualism embodied by a given culture?

2.1. Study 1. Is the proportion of collectivism and individualism static or dynamic across the autobiographical narrative?

The objective of Study 1 was to determine whether expression of autonomy (individualism) and relatedness (collectivism) in autobiographical narrative varies as a function of memory age and (sub) culturally-defined group membership. In this study, all participants were native-speakers of Russian, though from different regions; half had spent their lives in the countryside and were raised with a collectivist orientation; the other half were city dwellers and hence tended more towards an individualist perspective. This feature of the design made it possible for us to examine the impact of cultural orientation on autobiographical memory, while hold language constant.

2.1.1. Method

Forty women participated in this study. Twenty lived in small villages in Kostroma district (576 km. from Moscow) since their birth (mean age 81) and 20 lived in Moscow since their birth (mean age 79). We assume that the rural participants were raised and lived their lives as members of a collectivistic society and the urban participants as members of an individualistic society. All participants were instructed “to tell their lives”. Researchers asked additional questions to estimate the year during which each event occurred when it was unclear. The interviews lasted between 2 and 3 hours. All stories were audio recorded, transcribed and coded. Content analysis consisted of extracting verbal markers of autonomous and relatedness self for each recollection. Relatedness (collectivistic) markers were the following: 1) The pronouns “You”, “We”, “He”, “She”, “All”, “They”; 2) Verbs describing group activities (e.g., “we worked together”); 3) Names of other people; 4) The names of relatives or terms referring to relatives (e.g., “mom,” “dad”); 5) Words with meaning of professional or other membership (i.e. “peasants”, “troops”). Autonomy (individualistic) markers were the following: 1) The pronouns “I”, “Me”, “My”, “Mine”; 2) Name of participant; 3) Verbs describing personal activities (e.g., “I mowed a grass”); 4) Words denoting some, those meant unique characteristics (i.e. “only bride at the street”). For each recollection, we computed the number of collectivistic markers and the number of individualistic markers. These tallies were then separately divided by the number of sentences in the participant’s description of an episode. This procedure yielded two coefficients per description of an episode – a coefficient of collectivism and a coefficient of individualism. Then we summed the coefficients for each year of life and divided by the number of memories obtained in the study for each year. Finally we got two graphs that demonstrate normalized mean proportion of verbal markers of collectivism and individualism by age of memories.

2.1.2. Results.

Across the two groups, 960 dated memories were collected and analyzed. Figure 1a shows the temporal distribution of verbal markers of collectivism and individualism in group of rural participants. In general collectivistic verbal markers were twice as common as individualistic markers. Interestingly, there is a similar proportion of individualism markers in the rural and urban samples. This indicates that individualism and collectivism are not the ends of the same scale. Instead, these data suggest that autonomy and relatedness can be understood as basic human needs, that may appear to conflict, but that are actual quite compatible. There are two age periods during which rural participants recollected their past individualistically: childhood and old age. When describing events from their childhood, these rural women used individualistic words 5 times more than they used collectivistic words. The pattern was some different for events that happened during old age. For these events, the proportion of both collectivistic and individualistic markers increased. Thus it appears that people from this generally collectivistic population have individualistic representations of childhood and old age. This claim is consistent with the cultural context; this traditional culture requires a high level of autonomy from children (rural children take care of themselves and spend much time on their own) and places a high value of old age in traditional culture (age of wisdom, age of family authority, age of spirituality).

Figure 1b shows the distribution of verbal markers of collectivism and individualism in group of urban participants. In the urban sample there was the equal proportion of collectivistic and individualistic verbal markers. In words, the parameters for individualism and collectivism were for the most part very close across the lifespan in this set of narratives. However, it is also clear that these urban participants recollected early childhood years in collectivistic manner. Thus it appears that people from this generally individualistic population have a collectivistic representation of childhood. We interpret those facts in terms of urban life style, which requires a high level of relatedness from children (children generally are under total care of parents and grandparents).

In brief, we have described two culturally specific semantic profiles of autobiographical narratives; those reflect a dynamical nature of its self-related parameters. Verbal references to the collectivistic- self and the individualistic self do not exclude each other, though the proportion of collectivistic and individualistic verbal markers generally reflect the dominant orientation of the local culture. However, there are limited periods of inversion. Specifically, members of the collectivistic society recollect their childhood and old age with a high proportion of

individualistic words, and members of the individualistic society recollect their childhood with a high proportion of collectivistic words.

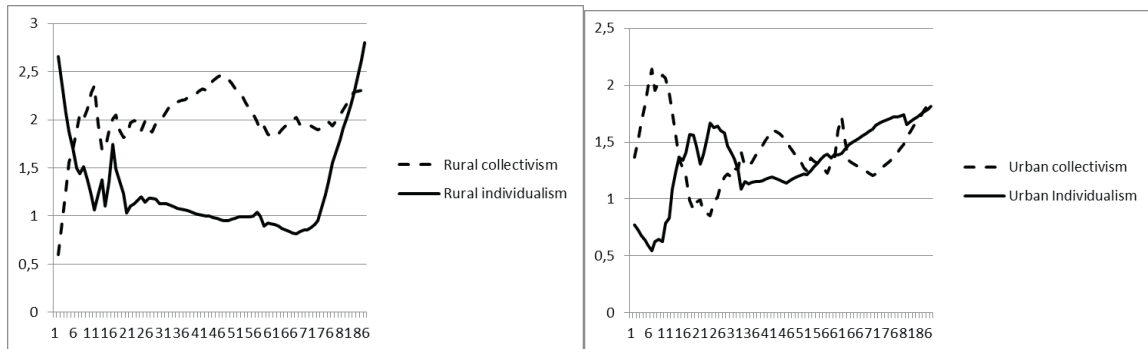


Fig. 1. Mean proportion of collectivistic / individualistic verbal markers by age of memory (normalized).
(a) Rural sample; (b) Urban sample.

3. Autobiographical memory as a Self-Memory System.

In the framework of the cultural-historical activity methodology [12], memory is interpreted not as a reactive reproductive “store” but as a flexible process that constantly adapts to a person’s goals, motives, and conditions. On this view, the specific phenomenology of memories is determined by the place of the material in the structure of current activity. One of the most influential theories in the area, Conway and Pleydell-Pearce’s [13] Self Memory System theory (SMS), holds that autobiographical memories are constructed “on-line.” (also see, [14]). From our perspective, SMS is in line with an activity-based account to memory. According to the Conway model, autobiographical memories are the “transitory mental constructions” comprising the episodic record of discrete past events, self-knowledge system, and the working self, depending on goal activity status, which mediates between the first two. So the concrete phenomenology of any given memory depends upon three partly interdependent factors: 1) what the person experienced in the past; 2) what the person think and feel about himself from a life-long perspective (conceptual self + autobiographical knowledge), and 3) what the person wants and cares about at the moment of recall.

No consensus exists concerning which component of SMS is more powerful – the working self or long-term self. There is a speculation that the content of autobiographical memories is determined by the set of goals and motives that were active when that memory was formed [15]. Support for this notion comes from a Conway and Holmes study [16] which provides an analysis of free recall memories obtained from old adults. These authors found a prevalence of memories thematically associated to the psychosocial stage at the age of encoding (on the basis of Erikson’s theory). For instance, they classified about half of the memories retrieved from adolescence and the teen years were related to an “identity achievement versus identity confusion” theme and that about 40% of memories recalled from the middle age period (40 to -49) concerned the “generativity versus stagnation” theme. Clearly, these data indicate long-term self-priority plays a central role in autobiographical memory.

In contrast, we have data that argue for the centrality of working self. For example, in a previous study [17], [18] we asked Muscovites to recall their memories for a series of terrorist attacks which took place in their city in September 1999. Data were collected twice; the first session took place 6 months prior to the hostage-taking at the Dubrovka theatre center (October 2002), and the second occurred 3 days after it. When compared to the memories collected during Session 1 the Session-2 memories were significantly more vivid; the imagery was more detailed; participants had more confidence in their memories and they considered them more meaningful. We argued that these differences in the content of memories reflect the need for safety, as need which comes to dominate the working self after the new a new tragic event.

But the question remains; what happens when there is a conflict between actual working self and long-term self? We examine this issue in the present study which focuses on the autobiographical memories of women who spent

their youth in rural Russia and their adult years in Moscow. These women were raised in a collectivistic culture but spent most of their lives in an individualistic one. This fact makes it possible to determine whether the current (individualistic) working self or the long-term (collectivistic) self is more important when people recollect earlier periods of their lives.

3.1. Study 2. Are distant memories prone to transformation in accord with current cultural context?

The objective of the second study was to examine what happens when a person changes cultural context as a young adult. Will someone, who was born in village and moved to the city recollect her past in the way she experienced it or in compliance with her current cultural situation?

3.1.1. Method

The 20 women who participated in this study were born in rural Russia and moved to Moscow or Yekaterinburg as young adults (i.e., between 18-20 years age). Their mean age at the time of the study was 79.2. The procedure was the same as the one described above.

3.1.2. Results

This group of women produced 342 dated memories. The lifespan distribution of collectivism markers and individualism markers produced in this study is presented in Figure 2. These data indicate that people in this migrant sample relied on a collectivist orientation to describe events from their childhood and then switched away from that orientation when describing events from their adult years. Importantly, there are a few individualistic verbal markers in their early recollections. However, because they experienced their childhood as rural subjects, they must have encoded it individually. Despite this fact, these individuals recollected their childhood collectivistically and displayed the roughly the same marker patterns as the urban participants did in Study 1. This finding is consistent with the idea that reconstruction plays an important role in autobiographical memory and implies it is the current self-concept (working self) rather than cultural orientation at the time of encoding that determines how distant memories will be recounted. In other words, the semantic representation of one's childhood reflects the current self more than it reflects the past self.

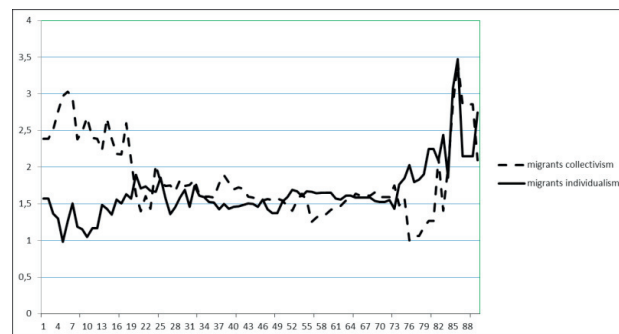


Fig.2. Mean proportion of collectivistic / individualistic verbal markers by age of memory (normalized). Sample of participants who were born in village and moved into a big city at about 18-20 years old.

4. Conclusions

Individualism-collectivism has been the focus of much cross-cultural research and is often considered to be the most important constructs in the area. We consider autobiographical narrative as an objective form of autobiographical memory. In turn, autobiographical memory proposed to be a “substratum” for culturally specific mode of personality. In the present study, we posited that collectivism and individualism are represented in

autobiographical narratives dynamically. In particular we assumed that people can change their orientation towards collectivism/individualism of the course of their lives. In other words, it appears shift their perspectives as they change social roles. On the one hand, we found (sub)culturally specific intervals of individualistic memories in generally collectivistic autobiographical narratives (childhood and old age). On the other hand, we found (sub)culturally specific intervals of collectivistic memories in generally individualistic autobiographical narratives (childhood). In this article, we have assumed that autobiographical memory is a system that is strictly associated with an active set of motives and with a long-term conception of self. Given these assumptions, we examined the influence of a new cultural context on the semantic representation of distant memories and we found that people who experienced their childhood in rural culture and then migrated to an urban one recall their youth in a way that reflected their current individualist orientation. This finding demonstrates both the constructive nature of autobiographical memory and the relevance of current identity characteristics to the reconstructive process.

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