

## The culture of memory

Researchers are discovering that our culture helps shape how we remember our past--and how far back our memory stretches.

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September 2005, Vol 36, No. 8

Print version: page 56

Ask an American his or her earliest memory, and you'll probably hear something like this: "My cousin's wedding, I was 3." Or perhaps: "Sitting on the beach, making a sandcastle with my brother. I was almost 4."

Any earlier than about 3.5 years is, for most of us, a blank slate. We all have what Freud first called "childhood amnesia"--an inability to remember our earliest childhood.

Ask a Maori New Zealander about his or her earliest memory, though, and you might find that the childhood amnesia ended a bit sooner. A Maori's first memory might be of attending a relative's funeral at 2.5 years old. A Korean adult, on the other hand, might not remember anything before age 4.

Of course, memory varies widely from person to person. But over the past decade, researchers have also found that the average age of first memories varies up to two years between different cultures

"We think that this is a function of the meaning of memory within a particular cultural system," says Michelle Leichtman, PhD, a psychologist at the University of New Hampshire who studies childhood memory. In other words, the way parents and other adults discuss--or don't discuss--the events in children's lives influences the way the children will later remember those events.

People who grow up in societies that focus on individual personal history, like the United States, or ones that focus on personal family history, like the Maori, will have different--and often earlier--childhood memories than people who grow up in cultures that, like many Asian cultures, value interdependence rather than personal autonomy, says Leichtman.

Now, she and other researchers are working to understand the nuances of these differences and the particular factors that shape memory in different cultures.

How old were you?

In 1994, psychologist Mary Mullen, PhD, published the first research comparing the ages of first memories across cultures. In a study in the journal *Cognition* (Vol. 52, No. 1, pages 55-79), she asked more than 700 Caucasian and Asian or Asian-American undergraduates to describe their earliest memories. Mullen--a Harvard University graduate student at the time--found that on average the Asian

and Asian-American students' memories happened six months later than the Caucasian students' memories.

The next year Mullen repeated the study with Caucasian Americans and native Koreans, and she found an even bigger difference: Nearly 16 months separated the two, according to the study published in *Cognitive Development* (Vol. 10, No. 3, pages 407-419).

"Those papers were really the springboard from which we began," says Harlene Hayne, PhD, a psychologist who studies culture and memory at the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand.

Hayne has looked at earliest memories among Caucasian, Asian and Maori New Zealanders. In a 2000 study in the journal *Memory* (Vol. 8, No. 6, pages 365-376), she found that on average, as in Mullen's studies, Asian adults' first memories were later than Caucasians' (57 months as compared with 42 months). But she also found that Maori adults' memories reached even further back, to 32 months on average.

These differences can be explained by the social-interaction model developed by Katherine Nelson, PhD, a psychologist at the City University of New York, says Leichtman. According to this model, our autobiographical memories don't develop in a vacuum; instead, as children, we encode our memories of events as we talk over those events with the adults in our life. The more those adults encourage us to spin an elaborate narrative tale, the more likely we are to remember details about the event later.

This model applies within as well as between cultures, Leichtman says. She and colleague David Pillemer, EdD, have examined the effect that "high-elaborative" versus "low-elaborative" mothers have on their children. High-elaborative mothers spend a lot of time talking to their children about past events and encourage their children to give them detailed stories about daily life. Low-elaborative mothers, on the other hand, talk less about past events and tend to ask closed rather than open-ended questions.

In a 2000 study in *Cognitive Development* (Vol. 15, No. 1, pages 99-114), Leichtman arranged for a preschool teacher who'd been on maternity leave to come back and visit her class. The next day, Leichtman and her colleagues observed the mothers of the students talk to their children about the visit and coded the degree to which the mothers used a high-elaborative or low-elaborative style of speaking. Three weeks later, the researchers asked the children what they remembered about the visit--and the children with high-elaborative mothers remembered more details.

In general, Leichtman says, parents in Asian cultures have a more low-elaborative style than parents in the United States. In contrast, Maori culture is even more focused on personal history and stories than American culture, Hayne says.

"In Maori culture there's a very strong emphasis on the past--both the personal past and the family's past," she explains. "They look backward with an eye to the future." And hence they remember more of their own past as well.

We remember what we need

Leichtman and the other researchers emphasize that their studies do not imply that Caucasians or Maoris have "better" memories than Asians. Instead, Leichtman explains, people have the types of memories that they need to get along well in the world they inhabit. In the United States, she says, it's adaptive to have detailed narratives of childhood to relate.

"That's the way we bond with each other, by telling stories of our personal past," she says. "It's consistent with our independently oriented culture, where the emphasis is on standing out and being special and unique. In more interdependently oriented cultures, the focus is more on interpersonal harmony and making the group work, and the way in which people connect to each other is less often through sharing memories of personal events."

In other cultures, she says, the attitude is different: "They might think 'If both of you were at an event, then what would be the purpose of rehashing it between you?'"

To many Americans, she says, this lack of interest in one's own or others' personal pasts violates what we think of as a truism--that the fundamental thing that makes us who we are is our personal memories. But in some cultures she's examined, personal memory isn't nearly as important as it is to Americans. In an unpublished study of adults in rural India, for example, she found that, during a scripted interview, only 12 percent of the participants identified a specific memory from childhood. A specific memory might be "the day my father fell down a well," as opposed to a general memory like "I went to school," Leichtman explains. In comparison, 69 percent of American participants related a specific memory.

Future directions

That there are cultural differences in memory is by now fairly well established, says Leichtman, and researchers are beginning to untangle the nuances of what causes those differences.

For example, Cornell University psychologist Qi Wang, PhD, is studying Chinese-American immigrants to see how their early childhood memories compare with those of native Chinese and native Americans. Leichtman is examining the differences between rural and urban Indians to see whether patterns of how people discuss the past, and thus early memory, are changing in that culture.

Pillemer, of the University of New Hampshire, is taking a slightly different tack on early-memory research. In a recent study in press at the journal *Memory*, he and graduate student Kate Fiske asked Caucasian and Asian participants about their earliest memories of a dream.

"Dreams are private, so the only way someone else would know about it is if you talked to them about it," he says, "so it's an interesting test of the social-interaction model." The researchers found that, as they had hypothesized, Caucasians' average age for their first remembered dream was almost one year younger than that of Asians--5.6 years old compared with 6.4 years.

Overall, Leichtman says, "It's not yet an old idea" that culture influences memory. "Right now we're really refining it and working out the wide variety of mechanisms that cause it."