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Methodological Aspects in the Study of Autobiographical Memory

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Abstract

Although the last three decades have seen an increased use of objective assessments of autobiographical memory, contemporary memory researchers agree that self-report instruments remain a fundamental method for investigating autobiographical memory phenomena. The present article focuses on two specific types of self-report instruments used in the field of autobiographical memory psychology: narrative tasks and questionnaires. The author carefully retraces the development of these instruments throughout the history of scientific psychology, paying particular attention to those most commonly used in contemporary cognitive psychology research. Finally, the findings of a recent methodological study investigating the relationship between narrative and questionnaire assessments of autobiographical memory are presented and critically discussed.

Keywords: autobiographical memory, narratives, order effects, questionnaires, research methods

In all disciplines, scientific or purely speculative, a critical reflection on research methods has the potential to shed light on theory and conceptual issues. Psychology is not an exception. The present work aims to offer such a contribution with specific reference to the psychology of autobiographical memory, a field of contemporary

psychological sciences which has developed a well-defined identity only relatively recently, or since the second half of the 1970s (for a historical analysis, see Robinson 1986; Sotgiu 2021).

This article consists of three main sections. In the first one, I will provide a definition of the concept of autobiographical memory which reflects the most important theoretical and empirical advances in contemporary scientific psychology. In the second section, I will describe the characteristics of self-report instruments commonly used by autobiographical memory researchers. Finally, in the third section, I will present and discuss the findings from a methodological study that I personally conducted in collaboration with two colleagues: Stefania Consonni (University of Bergamo, Italy) and Davide Marengo (University of Turin, Italy), respectively. As I will try to demonstrate, this study – the results of which were published very recently (Sotgiu et al. 2025) – provides new theoretical insights into the relationship between autobiographical memory and autobiographical narrative.

1. What is Autobiographical Memory?

Providing an operational definition of the autobiographical memory concept is by no means straightforward (Conway 1990). This has to do with the multifaceted nature of autobiographical memory processes and their complexity. However, in recent years, Sotgiu (2021: 64–65) identified twelve features of the autobiographical memory concept on which contemporary psychologists seem to have achieved widespread agreement. They may be summarised as follows.

1. The concept of autobiographical memory refers to the individuals' capacity to recollect the vast volume of information from their pasts, including private and public events, subjective feelings, and personal semantic data (e.g. knowing one's date of birth).

2. Remembering one's personal past involves the whole of the psychological processes bound up in the encoding, retention, and retrieval memory stages.
3. Autobiographical memory encompasses neurobiological, cognitive, emotional, social, cultural, and linguistic components.
4. Autobiographical memory is supported by two well-studied memory systems: the semantic memory (which retains general knowledge of the world) and the episodic memory (which retains personal experiences with a time and space context).
5. The contents of autobiographical memory can be accessed both voluntarily and involuntarily.
6. Autobiographical memory is selective: i.e. only part of the information forming an individual's past is available to retrieval.
7. Autobiographical memory is reconstructive: i.e. autobiographical recollections are not faithful reproductions of the events which were originally experienced.
8. Remembering an autobiographical episode (either voluntarily or involuntarily) often reactivates subjective feelings, sensory images, and bodily sensations very similar to those experienced by the individual at the original event.
9. Memories stored in the autobiographical memory mainly include emotionally charged events having self-definition implications.
10. The investigation of autobiographical memory comprises an in-depth enquiry into the ways people appraise their past experiences in the present time.
11. Autobiographical memory is a key component of the so-called *mental time travel*: i.e. the psychological processes enabling individuals to move backwards towards the past or forwards towards the future (cf. Tulving 2002).

12. Autobiographical memory is linked to other important psychological processes such as personality, motivation, emotion, visual imagery, and metacognition.

2. The Investigation of Autobiographical Memory by Means of Self-Report Instruments

As a result of the progress of neurosciences, the last three decades have seen an increased use of objective assessments of autobiographical memory. These were made possible by the implementation of a wide range of neuroimaging techniques including Positron Emission Tomography (PET), functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI), Electroencephalography (EEG), and transcranial Direct Current Stimulation (tDCS). While the use of these techniques in laboratory experiments has profoundly modified our understanding of autobiographical memory, contemporary memory researchers agree that self-report instruments – together with their subjective measurements – are still a key method for investigating autobiographical memory phenomena (Congleton & Berntsen 2019; Madan 2024; Rubin 2005). In the following two sections, I will focus on two specific types of self-report instruments: narrative tasks and questionnaires.

3. Narrative Tasks

The first memory study using an autobiographical narrative task was conducted by the French psychologists Victor and Catherine Henri in late 19th century (Henri & Henri 1897). These authors asked 123 participants to write a personal narrative in response to the following prompt: "What is the earliest memory of your childhood that you have? Please describe it as fully as possible, indicating how clear it is, the way it appears, and your age when the remembered event occurred" (Henri & Henri 1897: 184). While Henri and Henri focused on a very specific

category of personal memories (i.e. earliest recollections of childhood), contemporary researchers investigating autobiographical memory by means of narrative tasks have targeted personal recollections relating to a variety of life events. These include events eliciting very intense negative feelings (also called *low points*), events bound up with intense feelings of joy and happiness (also called *high points*), events leading to significant changes (either positive or negative) in individuals' lives (also called *turning points*), traumatic events, transgressions, and so on (see McAdams 1996; McAdams 2008; McLean et al. 2017).

Regardless of their content, life events remembered by research participants have been classified into different categories based on their temporal duration and frequency of occurrence. With this regard, several authors (e.g. Barsalou 1988; Conway 2005) proposed a distinction between specific, extended, and recurring events. Both specific and extended events are personal experiences occurring just once in an individual's life: however, while specific events typically last less than a day (e.g. "Yesterday, I went to the restaurant with my sister"), extended events last longer (e.g. "My honey moon in Costa Rica"). On the other hand, recurring events refer to personal experiences which can be repeated many times (e.g. "Fridays at the film club"). Interestingly, narrative task instructions implemented in autobiographical memory research may be properly adapted to each of the above-mentioned event categories (for an example, see Waters et al. 2014).

Autobiographical narrative tasks provide memory researchers with precious information on how individuals represent their personal past at a linguistic level. Using automated coding systems is the fastest way to analyse the content of these representations. An example of these systems is the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count software (LIWC), which was developed by the American psychologist James Pennebaker and his colleagues (Boyd et al. 2022; Pennebaker et al. 2015). The

LIWC calculates the percentage of words in the text that match a series of linguistic categories defined in the software's dictionaries: for example, pronouns, auxiliary verbs, sensory terms, affect terms, and cognitive terms. Importantly, all these linguistic data can be used to quantitatively measure the narrative processes operating when individuals are asked to recount their past experiences, either orally or in writing.

Different from the LIWC and other similar computer-based word count programmes, manual coding systems developed for the analysis of autobiographical narratives are rather time-consuming. In fact, their implementation involves a minimum of two researchers, who are asked to follow a two-step procedure: in a first phase, they use various types of self-report rating scales to assess the narrative individually; then, in a second phase, researchers compare their individual coding, discuss and debate on them, and formulate a final shared assessment. It is important to emphasise that most of the manual coding systems used by contemporary autobiographical memory researchers focus on one of the following features: narrative content, narrative organisation, and autobiographical reasoning. While providing an exhaustive review of all the instruments assessing these features is beyond the aims of the present article, in the following I will offer a brief description of those coding systems most widely used in the current autobiographical memory literature.

Among the manual coding systems focused on narrative content, McAdams et al.'s (1996) scheme for agency and communion themes is worth mentioning. McAdams et al. defined both agency and communion as two broad and multidimensional human tendencies encompassing personality traits, personal values, as well as social needs and motives. In particular, their coding scheme assesses four agency themes (i.e. self-mastery, status, achievement/responsibility, and empowerment) and four communion themes (i.e. love/friendship,

dialogue, care/help, and community). A number of studies implementing the original (McAdams et al. 2006) or subsequent adapted versions of this coding scheme (Gehrt et al. 2024; McLean et al. 2020) have demonstrated that individuals producing autobiographical narratives high in agency describe themselves as persons able to achieve some degree of control over the course of their experiences; by contrast, individuals producing autobiographical narratives high in communion describe themselves as persons experiencing intense feelings of intimacy, belonging, and union.

As far as narrative organisation is concerned, one of the most used coding schemes is that one by Reese et al. (2011), which was specifically developed to assess narrative coherence, namely the extent to which a narrative of a personal event "is one that *makes sense* to a naive listener—not just in terms of understanding when, where, and what event took place but also with respect to understanding the meaning of that event to the narrator" (Reese et al. 2011: 425). This scheme separately assesses three dimensions of narrative coherence: i.e. context, chronology, and theme. Context indicates the extent to which an autobiographical narrative includes specific information regarding the space and time of the reported event. Chronology concerns the temporal sequence of facts and actions mentioned by the narrator. Theme indicates the extent to which the narrator maintains a focus on a single topic, elaborates causal connections between the various parts of the narrative, and provides personal evaluations and interpretations on what he or she narrated.

With regard to autobiographical reasoning, an anything but negligible number of the currently available coding schemes (e.g. Banks & Salmon 2013; McLean & Fournier 2008; Merrill et al. 2016; Pasupathi et al. 2007) have been designed to assess self-event connections, namely statements where research participants make an explicit connection between their personal past and their (current

and/or past) sense of self. For example, according to the scheme developed and implemented by Merrill et al. (2016), self-event connections can be distinguished in the following five categories: dispositions (e.g. "I am the type of person who…"), values (e.g. "It wasn't fair"), outlook (e.g. "I think of how lucky I am"), personal growth (e.g. "It has shaped my personal identity"), and intimacy (e.g. "I feel close to my family"). Noteworthy, according to the same coding scheme, self-event connections can also be categorised based on their emotional valence (positive or negative; on this issue, see also Banks & Salmon 2013).

4. Questionnaires

Questionnaires accompany autobiographical memory research since its very beginning. British scientist Francis Galton (1822-1911) was the first researcher to develop and administer a questionnaire specifically designed to assess self-reported characteristics of autobiographical memories (Galton 1880). This questionnaire, also known as "Galton's breakfast table questionnaire", provides participants with instructions to recall a specific situation of their everyday life, namely the appearance of their breakfast table from their morning's breakfast. Exact wording of the instructions used by Galton was the following: "Before addressing yourself to any of the Questions on the opposite page, think of some definite object—suppose it is your breakfast table as you sat down to it this morning—and consider carefully the picture that rises before your mind's eye" (Galton 1880: 301). Once participants completed this memory elicitation task, they were administered a set of open-ended questions assessing three distinct phenomenological characteristics of their personal recollections: i.e. illumination ("Is the image dim or fairly clear? Is its brightness comparable to that of the actual scene?"), definition ("Are all the objects pretty well defined at the same time, or is the place of sharpest

definition at any one moment more contracted than it is in a real scene?"), and colouring ("Are the colours of the china, of the toast, bread crust, mustard, meat, parsley, or whatever may have been on the table, quite distinct and natural?"). It is interesting to note that all these characteristics concern the visual imagery taking shape when participants accessed their memories. In fact, that was the main focus of Galton's empirical study using the breakfast table questionnaire (Galton 1880; 1883; for a critical analysis of the results obtained in this investigation, see Brewer & Schommer-Aikins 2006).

Galton's breakfast table questionnaire has a great historical value as it offered the first method to assess the subjective experience of remembering the personal past. In fact, in contemporary autobiographical memory literature, there are numerous questionnaires investigating the same topic. However, different from Galton's breakfast table questionnaire, they are used to investigate any type of personal memory and do not exclusively assess visual imagery characteristics. Moreover, respondents are generally asked to introspectively assess their remembering experience using rating scales.

Among the currently available autobiographical memory questionnaires assessing phenomenology, it is worth mentioning the Memory Characteristics Questionnaire (MCQ, Johnson et al. 1988), which has been extensively used over the last four decades. This questionnaire consists of 39 items rated on 7-point Likert-type scales. The MCQ assesses a great number of phenomenological characteristics including clarity ("My memory for this event is: 1 = dim, 7 = sharp"), visual detail ("My memory for this event involves visual detail: 1 = little or none, 7 = a lot"), event detail ("My memory for this event is: 1 = sketchy, 7 = very detailed"), setting ("General setting is: 1 = unfamiliar, 7 = familiar"), remembered feeling ("I remember how I felt at the time when the event took place: 1 = not at all, 7 = definitely"), remembered

thoughts ("I remember what I thought at the time: 1 = not at all, 7 = clearly"), and current intensity ("As I am remembering now, my feelings are: 1 = not intense, 7 = very intense"). More recently, other researchers have developed new questionnaires targeting groups of phenomenological memory characteristics which are very similar to those assessed by the MCQ. These instruments include the Autobiographical Memory Questionnaire (AMQ, Rubin et al. 2003), the Emotional Memory Survey (EMS, Peace & Porter 2004), the Memory Experiences Questionnaire (MEQ, Sutin & Robins 2007), the Autobiographical Recollection Test (ART, Berntsen at al. 2019), and the Assessment of the Phenomenology of Autobiographical Memory (APAM, Vannucci et al. 2020).

Of course, autobiographical memory questionnaires assessing phenomenology are frequently used in contemporary cognitive psychology literature. However, there are also some questionnaires focusing on different aspects of autobiographical memory processes which offer equally valuable information on how people remember and introspectively evaluate their personal past. I would like to conclude this section by briefly describing two of them: the Thinking About Life Experiences questionnaire (TALE, Bluck et al. 2005) and the Centrality of Event Scale (CES, Berntsen & Rubin 2006).

The TALE (Bluck et al. 2005) assesses self-reported uses of autobiographical memory. Participants filling in this questionnaire are first instructed to think about their past in very general terms. In particular, the following instructions are used: "Sometimes people think back over their life or talk to other people about their life—it may be about things that happened quite a long time ago or more recently. We are not so interested in the times that you think back over specific events as in when and how you bring together and connect the events and periods of your life" (Bluck et al. 2005: 97). In the full version of the TALE, participants are asked to rate 28 statements on 6-point

Likert-type scales (1 = never, 6 = very frequently). Example statements include "I think back over or talk about my life or certain periods of my life when I think about my future goals", "I think back over or talk about my life or certain periods of my life when I am concerned about whether I am still the same type of person that I was earlier", and "I think back over or talk about my life or certain periods of my life when I want to strengthen a friendship by sharing old memories with friends". A number of studies (e.g. Maki et al. 2015; Rasmussen & Berntsen 2010; Wolf 2025) have demonstrated that the items constituting the TALE can be grouped into three distinct subscales. A first subscale measures the directive functions of autobiographical memory: i.e. individuals use their personal past as a guide orienting their (current and future) decisions and behaviours. A second subscale measures the social functions of autobiographical memory: i.e. individuals use their personal past to maintain and develop their social bonds. Finally, a third subscale measures the self functions of autobiographical memory: i.e. individuals use their personal past to reflect on their identity and to create a sense of self-continuity over time.

The CES (Berntsen & Rubin 2006) assesses the extent to which a self-reported event occupies a central position in an individual's life story. In the full version of this scale, participants are asked to rate their agreement with 20 statements using 5-point Likert-type scales (1 = totally disagree, 5 = totally agree). Example statements include "This event has become a reference point for the way I understand new experiences", "This event tells a lot about who I am", and "My life story can be divided into two main chapters: one is before and one is after this event happened". It is important to note that recent research has shown that CES scores obtained for negative self-reported events correlate highly or moderately with measures related to post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms, grief, shame, depression, anxiety,

neuroticism, and dissociation (see Gehrt et al. 2018). Overall, these findings suggest that the CES can provide data of clinical relevance.

5. A Study on the Relationship Between Narrative and Questionnaire Assessments of Autobiographical Memory

In this section, I will illustrate and discuss the findings from an experimental study conducted by Sotgiu et al. (2025), which specifically concerns the two categories of instruments assessing autobiographical memory described in the preceding section: i.e. narrative tasks and questionnaires. This study may be considered as methodological in nature. In fact, its authors experimentally manipulated the order of administration of narrative tasks and questionnaires with the goal of assessing the effect of this artificially created manipulation on the responses that research participants gave when filling in these instruments. As Sotgiu et al. noted, their study was the first to pursue such a goal. Indeed, while the current autobiographical memory literature includes many empirical studies jointly using narrative tasks and questionnaires (e.g. Banks & Salmon 2013; Bluck & Liao 2020; Bohanek et al. 2005; Luchetti & Sutin 2018; Peace & Porter 2004; Porter & Birt 2001; Sotgiu 2016, 2019; Wardell et al. 2021; Waters et al. 2013; Zambetti & Sotgiu 2023), all these studies employed an identical experimental design: i.e. the research participants first narrated (either orally or in writing) an autobiographical event and then filled in questionnaires about the characteristics of their self-reported memories.

In order to achieve their study goal, Sotgiu et al. (2025) adopted a between-subjects experimental design involving two groups of undergraduates. Subjects belonging to the ‘narrative-first group’ were first to produce a written narrative of an emotional event in their life and then to complete two questionnaires: i.e. one questionnaire

assessing autobiographical memory phenomenology [1] and the Centrality of Event Scale (Berntsen & Rubin 2006). Subjects belonging to the 'questionnaire-first group' were to carry out the same experimental tasks, but in reverse order: i.e. they were initially asked to only think about an emotional event occurring in their past, thus not providing any narrative; then, they filled in the same autobiographical memory questionnaires which were administered to the narrative-first group; as a last task, they provided a written narrative of the emotional event they thought about before completing the questionnaires.

Overall, the results of Sotgiu et al.'s (2025) study showed that the questionnaire-first group formulated longer narratives (in terms of word count) with a significantly higher number of memory details than the narrative-first group. However, the narrative-first group reported a higher percentage of words indicating affective processes. Apart from these three effects, Sotgiu et al.'s experimental manipulation did not influence any other response given by the subjects taking part in their study. Noteworthy, this held true for data collected by means of questionnaires, as well as for data deriving from the administration of the narrative task. In particular, with regard to the questionnaires, no significant group differences emerged either in the centrality of the recalled event, in its emotional intensity and hedonic valence, or in the phenomenological characteristics of the personal memories recalled by the participants (e.g., reliving, vividness, sensory details, rehearsal). Likewise, with regard to the narrative task, no significant group differences emerged either in the average percentage of words indicating cognitive processes and sensory and perceptual processes, or in the main thematic contents, or in the organisation of narratives.

[1] Seven of the 11 items included in this instrument were taken from a questionnaire previously developed by Rubin (2021).

Sotgiu et al. (2025) discussed in detail the empirical implications of these findings. In particular, they concluded that the order effects associated with their experimental manipulations were very limited in number and small in magnitude. On the other hand, the similarities between the two experimental conditions were substantial. Accordingly, they suggested that contemporary autobiographical memory researchers would maintain their convention of administering narrative tasks before questionnaires.

In the present article, I would like to supplement the conclusions mentioned above with some additional observations which underscore the theoretical significance of Sotgiu et al.'s (2025) findings. In my opinion, the null order effects found in this study can be interpreted in two different ways. On the one hand, they point to the fact that questionnaire measures of autobiographical memory are not influenced by narrative tasks, at least within the specific experimental situation designed and implemented by the authors of this investigation.

On the other hand, a probably more intriguing interpretation of Sotgiu et al.'s (2025) null results would consider that the strong similarities between the two experimental conditions might depend on the nature of the empirical indicators of autobiographical memory which were chosen by the authors. In the preceding section of the present article, it has been argued that self-report ratings included in autobiographical memory questionnaires assess the introspective processes that typically accompany the remembering experience. But precisely on the basis of results obtained by Sotgiu et al., it cannot be ruled out the possibility that even these introspective processes – which inevitably result in the formulation of metamemory self-reflective judgments (see Gopi & Madan, 2024) – do have a narrative (and perhaps even verbal) matrix which, as such, would make them immune to Sotgiu et al.'s experimental manipulations. Furthermore, it cannot be ruled out the opposite, namely that autobiographical

narrative tasks involve introspective processes which are identical or similar to those that individuals use when filling out a questionnaire. Of course, should this interpretation be valid, current theoretical models distinguishing the concepts and phenomena of autobiographical memory and autobiographical narrative (e.g. Smorti 2020) would have to be revised, at least to some extent. Autobiographical memory and autobiographical narrative should indeed be considered as fully or at least partially integrated, rather than complementary or correlated, processes. This could obviously influence the way memory researchers measure these processes at an empirical level.

6. Final Remarks

I would like to conclude this article by emphasising that methodological studies such the one conducted by Sotgiu et al. (2025) have the potential to shed light on the complexity of phenomena investigated in the field of autobiographical memory psychology, as well as on the difficulties involved in their conceptualisation and empirical measurement. Future autobiographical memory scholars thus have two major challenges ahead of them that will still require a great deal of effort and commitment: on the one hand, progressively refining the concepts they use, which do not always appear easily distinguishable at the theoretical level (e.g. autobiographical memory and autobiographical narrative); and, on the other hand, promoting the development of experimental designs and research methodologies that are appropriate to capture their defining characteristics.

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