

## Special Section: The Value of Personal Memories

# Remember and Review or Forget and Let Go? Views from a Functional Approach to Autobiographical Memory

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As humans, we show a certain contrariness in our view of remembering, particularly in relation to remembering our own personal past: we love to remember and we love to forget. This article explores this tension, providing a view from the functional approach to autobiographical memory. The benefits of remembering versus forgetting are discussed through exploration of three central questions: (i) What is the goal, the desired outcome, of remembering-forgetting (ii) does one principle, to remember or to forget, apply for both good and bad memories, and (iii) is it ethical to internally or externally manipulate others' memories to induce forgetting? Using the functional approach, memory is presented not simply as helpful in creating and maintaining well-being. Instead, both positive and negative memories are presented as resources that help us to orient more broadly, as social animals, in time and space (Liao & Bluck, 2013).

We cherish our treasured memories. Our past haunts us. We look back fondly at the good old days. We try to escape our past. These phrases describe common stances that people have towards memory—toward remembering the moments and days of their own personal past (Bluck, Alea, & Ali, 2014). The contrariness of these phrases belies the tension in the human views of memory as a friend and as a foe. One view is that we should appreciate our memories, remember and review them in order to learn from the past and make meaning of our lives. That view is grounded in the large, longstanding literature on reminiscence (e.g., Webster & Haight, 2002) and classic views of life review (Butler, 1963). Sometimes life is difficult though. Bad things happen. Most individuals at various points in life have painful experiences, face losses, or harbor regrets for past actions or inactions. In more serious cases, individuals face clinical disorders, suffering from depression or post-traumatic stress disorder in which rumination on negative past events creates psychological pain. Memory keeps the past alive, bringing the difficult past forward unbidden (Berntsen, 2007) to sully the present. In such circumstances, memory appears to be a foe from whom individuals might be freed from distress through simply forgetting.

This issue of whether to view memory as friend or foe is of course highly complex. The focus of this article is to ask: should we remember or should we forget? Though overly simplistic, examining this conundrum acts as a

springboard for consideration of some nuances of human autobiographical remembering. In particular, this tension between remembering and forgetting is considered from the functional perspective to autobiographical memory (Bluck, 2003; Pillemer, 1992). The functional perspective attempts to understand why, unlike most other animals, humans remember so much of their personal past experience as they move through time (Baddeley, 1988; Neisser, 1978).

### *Remember and Review or Forget and Let Go*

The literature on reminiscence and life review is based largely on the premise that it is good to remember, think about privately, and share one's past with others (e.g., Birren & Deutchman, 1991). Similarly, in the life story literature (McAdams, 2001) creating an integrated story of one's life through personal remembering and *autobiographical reasoning* (Habermas & Bluck, 2000), or making sense of one's *self-defining memories* (e.g., Singer & Blagov, 2003), is seen as positive for human understanding and action. The ability to recall past events starts in early childhood (Fivush, 2011) and is important across life phases: for developing identity in young adulthood (McLean & Pratt, 2006) and maintaining social bonds across the lifespan (Alea & Bluck, 2003). In short, a huge amount of literature is based on the notion that it is beneficial for humans to remember, reminisce about, and share their past. This view has led to a variety of therapeutic techniques and programs premised on the understanding that reviewing the personal past has psychosocial rewards (e.g., Westerhof, Bohlmeijer & Webster, 2010), though with the understanding that only

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some forms or reminiscence are directly related to positive mental and physical health (Cappeliez & O'Rourke, 2006).

In everyday life, however, individuals also value forgetting. That is, humans go through life remembering but also forgetting on a daily basis (Bauer, 2015). We often automatically forget the mundane and trivial as a matter of course, but we also sometimes try to forget, for example, to forgive and forget. We make a slight gaff and our friend says, 'forget about it.' A stressful encounter at work during the day keeps surfacing in memory that evening and we 'try to put it out of our mind' so as to relax. These everyday uses of forgetting fly in the face of the idea that we should remember and review our past. Moreover, these examples are only small instances of how we use forgetting to feel better about ourselves and our lives. An even stronger case can be made for the beauty of forgetting when we consider memory for tragic losses, serious heartache, or threats to bodily integrity through accident or violence. Forget fear. Forget pain and humiliation. Forget abandonment and persecution. All of those sound like reasonable guides for promoting one's mental health despite the benefits of reminiscence referred to above. As such, we face a conundrum in considering the benefits of remembering versus forgetting.

### Facing the Conundrum: Three Questions

I propose to grapple with three questions in the hope of elaborating some of the nuances of autobiographical remembering that lead humans to so heartily value remembering while eagerly embracing forgetting. I will provide some tentative answers to each of these questions, from a particular theoretical stance, a functional approach to autobiographical memory (Bluck, Alea, & Demiray, 2010; Neisser, 1978). The questions are:

- i. What is the goal, the desired outcome of remembering-forgetting?
- ii. Does one principle, to remember or forget, apply for both good and bad memories?
- iii. Is it ethical to internally or externally manipulate others' memories to induce forgetting?

To better contextualize responses to these questions, the functional approach is briefly reviewed so as to remind the reader of its basic tenets. Some tentative answers to the three questions are then presented.

*The functional perspective.* Beginning in the 1970s, researchers described the benefits of a functional approach to autobiographical memory (e.g., Baddeley, 1987; Bruce, 1989; Neisser, 1978). The primary interest from this perspective is not typical for memory researchers who are, themselves, often cognitive or neurocognitive psychologists. That is, the focus is not on the traditional questions of how much or how well humans can remember their personal past, though those features play some role, but with *why* humans remember so much about their lives, often over long periods of time.

Researchers who embrace a functional approach generally agree that autobiographical memories are shaped by the remembering context. Personal memories are adaptive (Robinson & Swanson, 1990; Bruce, 1989) and do not serve merely as records of events (Conway, Singer, & Tagini, 2004; Mace, 2007). As such, focusing solely on the mechanics of memory accuracy and performance lacks ecological validity (Neisser, 1978) and distracts researchers from asking important questions about how memory operates in daily life (Baddeley, 1988). Remembering the personal past fully and with complete accuracy may in fact be incongruous with a flexible memory system that helps humans to nimbly navigate daily life (Newman & Lindsay, 2009). Instead, memories of one's personal experiences in an ever-changing environment are seen, from the functional perspective, as records of lived experience that are constructed and reconstructed so as to be both accessible and adaptive (Kihlstrom, 2009). That is, the memory system is organized not only to represent the world but to serve psychosocial functions necessary for an individual to survive and flourish given the complex reality of their everyday environment (Liao & Bluck, 2013).

Within this theoretical approach, particular functions are served when people remember, reflect on, and share, the experiences of their lives. While different researchers have focused on varying sets of functions (Webster, 1999; Harris, Rasmussen, & Berntsen, 2014) most fit into one of three categories. These are well represented in Pillemer's (1992) formulation of autobiographical memory as having self (e.g., self-continuity), communicative (e.g., social-bonding), and directive (e.g., planning for present and future behaviors) functions. We have referred to these three more broadly as self, social and directive functions of remembering (Bluck & Alea, 2002). In brief, the self function is the use of autobiographical memory to enhance self-evaluation (Baddeley, 1988; Neisser, 1988), develop a sense of identity (Conway, 1996; Webster, 1999), and to feel one is a continuous person over time (Barclay, 1996; Liao & Bluck, 2013). The social function (Alea & Bluck, 2003) involves using autobiographical memory to initiate and maintain relationships (Alea & Bluck, 2007; de Vries, 2015), to empathize with others (Bluck, Baron, Ainsworth, Gesselman, & Gold, 2013; Cohen, 1998), or to teach and inform others (Pillemer, 1992). The directive function involves using memories to guide behavior (Baddeley 1988; Schank, 1981), develop current opinions (Cohen, 1998), and to predict and plan for the future (Baddeley, 1988; Pillemer, 2003).

*Three questions: some tentative answers.* A background on the functional approach to autobiographical memory including the self, social and directive functions it serves in daily life has been provided. We now return to the three questions posed in facing the conundrum of the benefits of human remembering versus forgetting.

i. What is the goal, the desired outcome of remembering-forgetting?

Considering the merits of remembering the personal past versus forgetting it raises the issue of what goals humans are striving for as they go about their lives remembering and forgetting. That is, it encourages us to consider the desired end or outcome of human remembering. Often, the goals of reminiscence have been therapeutic; for example, to increase well-being by reducing depression (O'Rourke, Cappeliez, Claxton, 2011). This is definitely a worthy goal and little can be said against the aim of reducing human suffering. Research showing the benefits of different reminiscence strategies and techniques for improving mental health (e.g., Birren & Deutchman, 2005) definitely focus on the benefits of remembering, not forgetting.

One concern however, is that psychology has become highly, possibly too highly, focused on psychological well-being. Well-being is an interesting construct with broad appeal and applied relevance (e.g., Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2015). From a philosophy of science perspective, however, the increasing tendency for psychology to embrace well-being as the ultimate human goal may be culturally biased (i.e., in line with the North American pursuit of happiness) and historically bound. From a functional perspective to autobiographical remembering, it is unlikely that memory evolved to make *homo sapiens* happy. Though one aspect of remembering may be to serve an emotion-regulation function (i.e., related to well-being), memory serves other functions such as developing and maintaining identity, creating social bonds, and using the remembered past to direct present and future behavior (Pillemer, 2003). As such, in thinking about the benefits of remembering versus forgetting, taking the documented functions of memory into account is necessary. While maintaining well-being is clearly a worthy and compassionate therapeutic goal, it is unlikely the original goal of the human autobiographical memory system.

ii. Does one principle, to remember or to forget, apply for both 'good and bad' memories?

Another issue for consideration in assessing the benefits of remembering versus forgetting is the content of the memory. Stated roughly, do we want to remember, or forget, the good and bad experiences of life in equal measure? Likely not. If we hold well-being as the ultimate outcome, the choice between remembering and forgetting becomes relatively clear. We should aim to remember all the emotionally-positive events and to forget or minimize the negatively-valenced ones (Lindeman, Zengel & Skowronski, 2016). That is, a good strategy might be to follow the old saying, 'we'll take the rose, the thorn forget, and go on our way rejoicing' (Unknown, Traditional). In the case of traumatic memories that are intrusive or induce painful rumination (e.g., James, Lau-Zhu, Clark, Visser,

Hagenaars, & Holmes, 2016), forgetting is likely to improve current mental health.

If well-being is not the sole and ideal outcome, however, both remembering and forgetting of positive and negatively-charged events is necessary, at least to some extent. Remembering and forgetting will both occur, in relation to situational and environmental demands, to serve useful psychosocial functions (Bluck, Alea, Demiray, 2010). For example, research has shown that when individuals recall having been in pain themselves, they show greater empathy toward another person perceived as in pain (Bluck, Baron, Ainsworth, Gesselman & Gold, 2013). In addition, individuals often report recalling past negative situations to learn from their mistakes so as to guide future, more positive, actions (Pillemer, 2003). In line with the functional approach to memory, recalling both the good and bad in life may not produce ultimate happiness but it may allow us to interact appropriately as social animals in dynamic environments and best navigate our way into an always uncertain future.

iii. Is it ethical to internally or externally manipulate others' memories to induce forgetting?

Painful memories, such as traumatic memories, can interfere with individuals' ability to live fulfilled lives. In these cases, dedicated professionals often seek ways to ease suffering. At a non-clinical level, individuals also sometimes face uncomfortable rumination or regret over difficult events from their past that come to haunt them. It seems that if the end is noble (i.e., to alleviate suffering) internally or externally manipulating other's memories may be ethically admissible, given that the individual makes this choice. This is not clear-cut, however, when one approaches this question from a functional perspective.

Consider first, the case of what I refer to as internal manipulation. The memory system has its own positive mechanisms already in place for ameliorating the recall of negative events (e.g., Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000). Specific examples include Fading Affect Bias (Lindeman, Zengel & Skowronski, 2016) and Temporal Distancing (Wilson & Ross, 2003). Working with those mechanisms, integrative life review (Birren & Deutchman, 2005; Butler, 1963) or viewing difficult events in hindsight (Freeman, 2010) can result in past difficulties being contextualized and reframed such that they are no longer painful, or at least not disturbingly so. Some therapeutic techniques aim to capitalize on existing memory processes, guiding reminiscence (for a review, see Westerhof, Bohlmeijer, & Webster, 2010). That is, therapeutic reminiscence can be seen as a gentle type of manipulation that works within the bounds of the current autobiographical memory system, guiding the internal reworking of negative memories. Though this still might be questionable, as it involves one individual leading another to reshape their past, it seems relatively benign from an ethical standpoint and is in line

with the broader goals of all clinical and counselling psychology.

Recent research has also focused, however, on understanding whether memories can be altered or eradicated through external manipulation. One line of research suggests that the valence of memories can be manipulated at a physiological level (i.e., in animal models; Redondo et al., 2014) and that fear memories can be altered artificially (Ramirez et al., 2013). Other research focuses particularly on clinical applications, treating depression, for example, and examines blocking the storage of reactivated memories through chemical means (e.g., propranolol; Nader, Hardt, & Lanius, 2013).

While remembering and forgetting are natural human processes, one might reasonably question whether scientists should develop means of externally manipulating individuals' memories, even in the service of helping them to forget the painful past. From a functional perspective, our memories serve us in so many ways, and their adaptive functions are highly situation- and context-dependent. Manipulating individuals' memories might thus improve mood but also run the risk of making the memory system less adaptive for facing new tasks and situations. Until we are clear what functions memory serves, and particularly the benefits of negative memories for guiding future behavior, it is unclear whether we really help an individual by externally manipulating their memory system. Instead, when we consider tampering with memories, we face a balancing act between alleviating suffering and maintaining an individual's remembered past, their own unique life story, intact for future use.

## Conclusion

As humans, we show a certain contrariness in our view of remembering. Most people would likely endorse remembering over forgetting for a variety of everyday memory tasks (e.g., remembering where we parked, what we want to get at the store, when our aunt's birthday is, that we have a doctor's appointment next week, the capital of France). When it comes to remembering our own personal past, however, to autobiographical remembering, we face a tension: we love to remember and we love to forget. This article has explored the tension between remembering and forgetting particularly from a functional approach to autobiographical memory. In doing so, memory has been presented not simply as helpful in mood regulation, in creating and maintaining well-being. Instead, both positive and negative memories are presented as resources that help us to orient in time and space (Liao & Bluck, 2013). The autobiographical memory system allows us to navigate life but doing so may sometimes come at the expense of well-being. Indeed, if the goal of the memory system is to serve adaptive self, social and directive functions, then losing even a difficult or painful memory might hurt an individual in terms of their long-term thriving. In cases where memories are very painful and debilitating, and internal manipulation such as

reminiscence techniques or life story-based counselling does not alleviate that pain, external manipulation may be an alternative. New forms of physiological and chemical therapies are on the frontier that may allow change or eradication of memories. From a functional approach, however, this should be done with great caution, of course only at the request of the individual, and with respect for the integrity of the autobiographical memory system. That is, we must not forget: the human ability to recall so much of our own personal past serves us in many excellent ways as we move through our daily lives.

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