COMMENTARY

Making You My Own: Three Critical Parameters for a Theory of Vicarious Memory

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Reflecting on Pillemer et al.'s (2024) comprehensive and authoritative article, our commentary flags three critical issues we believe could benefit from further conceptual specification to refine vicarious memory theory. First, we take the stand that vicarious memory is distinct from autobiographical memory and needs to be more precisely defined in its own right. In service of a definition, we explore how the two systems are separate but may intersect through what we term *vicarious reasoning*. Second, the allowable sources of vicarious memories need to be determined. We suggest vicarious memories can only be gleaned from close others, those with whom we identify. Third, several adaptive outcomes of vicarious remembering were presented in the target article. We suggest that once vicarious memories are defined in a more constrained manner, including delineating allowable sources, a tight conceptual rationale can be made for a small set of particular outcomes.

Keywords: autobiographical memory, vicarious reasoning, ecology, well-being, theory

The target article for this issue on the potentially adaptive outcomes of vicarious memories (Pillemer et al., 2024) is well-researched and timely. Beginning a decade ago with the introduction of the term *vicarious memory* (Pillemer et al., 2015; Thomsen & Pillemer, 2017), a body of research has developed (e.g., Lind, Thomsen, et al., 2019; Lind & Thomsen, 2018). One arm of that is a focus on adaptive outcomes of vicarious remembering (Lind, Jørgensen, et al., 2019; Pond & Peterson, 2020; Thomsen et al., 2020; Thomsen & Vedel, 2019). A precise theoretical framework for guiding and synthesizing research in this area will be a next step and a boon to researchers. We understand that the authors' aim with the target article was to introduce the construct of vicarious memory and promote its value to a wider audience across subareas of psychology and across disciplines (D. Pillemer, personal communication, January 31, 2024). Their article provides a strong integrative conceptual framework and comprehensive literature review. As such, it expands the groundwork (i.e., earlier conceptual model; Thomsen & Pillemer, 2017) for a formal theoretical framework for investigating vicarious memories.

Writing a full theoretical article is arduous. Inspired by Pillemer et al. (2024), the focus of our commentary is to elaborate on just three parameters that we see as critical for any new theory of vicarious memory. These are to (a) specify the relation of vicarious memory to autobiographical memory, in the service of precisely defining vicarious memory; (b) delineate the source of vicarious memories, that is, from whom one can glean vicarious memories; and (c) provide a rationale for the particular adaptive outcomes expected from vicarious remembering.

Definitional Issues: Relating Vicarious Memory to Autobiographical Memory

Vicarious memories are not autobiographical. By definition, autobiographical memories are about experiences of the self in the past (Brewer, 1986): They include visual and other sensory imagery and a narrative of one's own lived experience (Pillemer, 1998). Vicarious memories are a somewhat newer and intriguing construct. They are not memories of our own lives but are defined as personal stories that we are exposed to and remember about other people's lives. Since they are secondhand (i.e., not personally experienced), vicarious memories are relatively impoverished phenomenologically (e.g., vividness, detail; see also Pillemer et al., 2015). In tandem, the narrative we have of the other's event is not our own rich autobiographical elaboration but only what we heard from the teller. As such, there is clear definitional differentiation.

Autobiographical memory and vicarious memory may, however, intersect. In our understanding, the only clear link between the two, when focusing on actual memory processes (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000), is if I am remembering the episode in which another person shared their memory with me. My autobiographical episode in which I heard the other's story is not, however, what is meant by vicarious memory in the literature. Instead, the *content* of what the person shared with me, including any inferential meaning they shared as part of their experience, is what constitutes the vicarious memory (Thomsen & Pillemer, 2017).

As an example, I (Susan) remember my mother and I having tea in a shop and her telling me an instructive story from when she herself was a girl, circa 1930. My own autobiographical memory, circa 1970, is of being cozy sitting in the shop with the rain on the windows, the robust cup of tea, the delicate cakes, my mother's face, and other aspects of that experience. We likely talked of many things, but one piece of that episode is my memory of the content of the instructive story she told me about her own childhood. My memory of the content of her story and what she made of it is the vicarious memory (i.e., visiting her distant auntie who was an opera singer at a posh hotel suite and being rather startled and put off at not being allowed in because she was not wearing gloves).

Considering this, we see clearly that vicarious memory is not autobiographical but may instead be a specific case of memory for conversations. This allows or even suggests that vicarious memories are semantic not episodic (Tulving, 1972). In some cases, though, if recall of the lived experience of the person telling us their story is part of our own autobiographical memory, then that vicarious memory may be a blend of episodic and semantic memory. As such, in defining vicarious memory, any future theory will need to delineate what kind of memory is meant when using the term vicarious memory (i.e., is it semantic, episodic, or autobiographical?).

In addition, though we all likely have some vicarious memories, most of what others tell us about their lives we promptly or eventually forget. For the vicarious memories we do recall, the literature indicates that we tend to organize them similarly to our own life story, that is, in chapters (e.g., Lind, Thomsen, et al., 2019; Thomsen et al., 2020) and specific memories (e.g., Pillemer et al., 2015). This holds at least when recalling vicarious memories of those we know well, such as close friends and family. The most well-known model of organization of autobiographical memory is the self-memory system model (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000). Would researchers studying vicarious memory expect there to be an other-memory system that is roughly parallel such that the organization of autobiographical and vicarious memories are the same? Tackling these issues will help further define vicarious memory as its own construct, distinct from autobiographical memory.

We have taken the position that vicarious memory is not autobiographical memory. Their overlap does need to be explored further, however, to understand how the stories of other people "are made mine." Since thinking about and reflecting on others' memories is not autobiographical (i.e., *autobiographical reasoning*, Habermas & Bluck, 2000), we suggest a process for which we introduce the term *vicarious reasoning* (VR). VR involves the listener actively listening to, reflecting on, and making meaningful inferences regarding a story learned about another person's life. The listener's engagement in VR involves their volitionally or nonvolitionally choosing what parts of the other person's story to recall, expanding on certain aspects while forgetting others, as they think back on the memory over time.

We posit that VR has two dimensions: other-oriented and self-oriented. Other-oriented VR can be understood as a type of temporal, other-mentalization (Bateman & Fonagy, 2010): The listener considers how the teller was thinking and feeling at the time of their lived experience and how that other person made sense of their original experience. In some cases, but not all, the listener may engage to such an extent in other-oriented VR that they feel a glimmer of first-person perspective of what it was like to really "be there" when the event happened (i.e., instead of the literally correct third-person perspective; Sutin & Robins, 2010). The next step in making the other person's memory mine is that the listener engages in self-oriented VR. That is, with the other person's experience now held in mind, the individual reflects on it and considers how it might relate to their own life story. Depending on the context, the individual may engage to various extents in each type of VR.

In sum, any new theory should specify a unique definition. If what is meant by a vicarious memory is not specified clearly, the term may end up referring to memories for things about others learned from a very wide variety of external sources. A strong definition should make the distinction between autobiographical and vicarious memories quite clear. That will not preclude delineating the overlap in how they are organized and the processes (e.g., VR) by which the listener makes the vicarious memory their own. These issues of definition are needed components of a theory of vicarious memory that has a tight prescriptive focus for driving future research.

Source of Vicarious Memories

Another critical parameter for a future theoretical framework is clarifying the source of vicarious memories. From what levels within the narrative ecology (Lind, 2023; based on Bronfenbrenner, 1994) can individuals glean vicarious memories? In this article, we have implied that the teller of the memory is an individual the listener knows, has likely known for some time, and that they are speaking to in person. The first author's vicarious memory of her mom's memory shared in the tea shop also suggests that the other person is one with whom the listener has a continuing socio-emotional bond. We believe this close type of relationship is most likely the source of a shared life experience that a listener would seriously take to heart, consider, and engage in VR about, thereby forming a vicarious memory. As such, when considering narrative ecology (Lind, 2023), we postulate vicarious memories would typically be derived from the microlevel.

Pillemer et al. (2024) provided a much more open view of the source of vicarious memories, including family, friends, support group members, work colleagues, and others. They also suggested that the listener does not need to hear the memory firsthand but can hear it through others (i.e., gossip; Dunbar, 2004) and that learning of the vicarious memory may not always occur in person. This allows that whenever an individual learns about another's lived experience, through any media, it may become a vicarious memory.

We suggest this may be too broad: It allows for a huge onslaught of material about others from several levels within the narrative ecology (e.g., not only micro- but exo- and macrolevels; Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Lind, 2023). For example, this could include stories from strangers who we meet in person or that we digest from the host of stories heard on social media platforms. It could also include the myriad stories that abound about famous public figures, athletes, and entertainers whose lives many individuals follow eagerly as fans (e.g., North American megastar singer Taylor Swift or Justin Bieber; Portuguese world-famous soccer player, Cristiano Ronaldo). If one allows the source of vicarious memories to be this broad, it also makes it unclear why fictional accounts of people's lives in novels and films should not be included as vicarious memories.

This will not do. Classic research suggests people are social animals keenly interested in other people and their lives (Aronson, 2018): Human beings attend constantly and sometimes carefully to

other's experiences (Festinger, 1954). Vicarious memories are not formed in all of these cases, however. Our relation to the individual who shares their memory is important to the formation of vicarious memories and thereby needs further specification. Indeed, Thomsen et al. (2020) showed no relations between personal life stories and vicarious life stories of others we are no longer close with (i.e., ex-friends or ex-romantic partners), compared to those who are still close (e.g., parents). Bolstering that finding, writing about vicarious life stories of famous people did not boost self-esteem to the same extent as writing about close personal others (Thomsen et al., 2021). These research findings support the need to limit vicarious memories to being garnered from a particular set of others.

We suggest that vicarious memories are most likely gained from those with whom the listener significantly identifies, who may be part of their *social convoy* across life (Antonucci et al., 2014), and will often be gleaned directly from the person who experienced the event. We speculate that those from whom we can gain vicarious memories are individuals that meet a "personal closeness threshold," such that one thinks of that other person in terms of "we" not "them" (Singer & Skerrett, 2014). We see this closeness, this identification with the other, as a necessary motivator for remembering the teller's story and vicariously reasoning about it in other-oriented and self-oriented ways.

Our idea, however, is that there is not a list of close relations (e.g., family members only) from whom we can gain vicarious memories but instead that a critical personal closeness threshold must be met. This threshold idea allows that ancestral or family myths (i.e., not told by the ancestor who experienced them but by close living relatives) may also be received as vicarious memories. If we accept that it is personal closeness that allows the formation of vicarious memories, this opens possibilities for lifespan research. As one example, who we most commonly identify as close others differs across the lifespan with adolescents and young adults tending to identify peers as closer than family (Kandel, 1986). Much interaction or exposure to peers in adolescence or young adulthood is virtual (i.e., in the current cohort), including strangers, influencers, or popular public figures. If young people feel sufficiently close to these figures, should online, sometimes thirdhand, exposure to those others' stories be considered vicarious memories? These and similar questions await empirical testing.

In sum, a critical parameter for a new theoretical framework is delineating the allowable sources of vicarious memories. Narrowing and specifying the nature of the others from whom we can glean vicarious memories will aid formation of a definition that represents a focused parsimonious construct.

Rationale for Particular Adaptive Outcomes

Pillemer et al. (2024) were highly inclusive in their ideas about the array of potential positive or adaptive outcomes related to vicarious remembering. Vicarious remembering has indeed been empirically linked to positive outcomes including subjective well-being (Thomsen & Vedel, 2019; however, not always; Thomsen et al., 2020), boosting self-esteem (Thomsen et al., 2021), and identity integration (Lind & Thomsen, 2018). A future theory will need to clearly specify the distinct outcomes to be expected. That is, as the vicarious memory construct is further defined, it will be necessary to understand more about what motivates people to recall others'

stories. Pillemer et al. (2024) provided the clear and pithy view that the unique advantage of vicarious memory is that it allows learning from episodes not directly observed, removed in time and space. That is, the individual may, in some cases, have a motivation to recall the other's experience because it can fulfill a certain function or use in their own life (Bluck & Alea, 2011; Lind et al., 2019). Some studies and the target article (Pillemer et al., 2024) indicate that recalling other people's life chapters and memories may even serve some of the same functions (Bluck & Alea, 2011) as one's personal autobiographical memories (e.g., Lind & Thomsen, 2018).

It lacks parsimony to suggest that a broad array of disparate, though all adaptive, outcomes are linked to any one psychological construct. No one psychological construct, including vicarious memory, is a panacea (Bluck & Levine, 1998). Often as a field is newly developing, researchers attempt to link the central construct to positive psychosocial outcomes, with empirical successes and failures in doing so. Once a clear definition of vicarious memory is established, it will be easier to forge a strong rationale for expecting specific outcomes and to delineate mechanisms by which vicarious remembering is linked to each proposed adaptive outcome.

Beyond creating a tighter definition, delineating specific outcomes will also rely on resolving the issue of allowable sources of vicarious memories. That is, if the allowable sources are defined too broadly, it will be hard to distinguish outcomes of vicarious remembering per se from outcomes being driven by other loosely related types of information about other people. Outcomes need to be clearly linked to vicarious remembering of personal events from others' lives. This does not include general information partially derived from others' lives gleaned broadly from personal and virtual and factual or fictional accounts that result in general incremental knowledge or building of one's overall worldview.

In thinking just a bit about outcomes, we offer the speculation that motivations to engage in VR about others' stories and thereby form vicarious memories may be: to fill gaps in one's own life story (e.g., birth origin or infantile amnesia period stories, family stories passed down about deceased ancestors), to aid identity development during adolescence when the life story first forms (Erikson, 1994; Habermas & Bluck, 2000), to avoid failure by learning from other people's hardships or mistakes, and to gain direction when facing novel, uncertain life situations.

In sum, more work will be needed to clearly draw links between vicarious remembering and adaptive outcomes. We believe, however, that this is a worthy goal as vicarious memories are fascinating and a ubiquitous part of daily life.

Conclusion

Vicarious memories are a unique form of memory that allows individuals to make the experiences of other people who are close to them as their own. The target article (Pillemer et al., 2024) provided an engaging view of vicarious memories and the ways that they may manifest in individuals' lives. Their work furthers the field immensely, moving us closer to a formal theory of vicarious remembering. In this commentary, we identified issues regarding definition, source of vicarious memories, and potential outcomes that we offer in the hope that they may be helpful in further delineating this fascinating construct.

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