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**the scrapbook
in your mind**
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the scrapbook in your mind

autobiographical memory
preserves scattered pictures of life events

Whether or not you have ever seen the 1973 Robert Redford and Barbra Streisand tearjerker, *The Way We Were*, you can probably sing its theme song—“Memories light the corners of my mind / Misty, water-colored memories of the way we were.” Lifespan developmental psychologist and autobiographical memory expert Susan Bluck says the song offers a pretty good description of how our memory works.

“Barbra Streisand is clearly not a cognitive psychologist, but she actually got a lot of it right,” says Bluck, an assistant professor jointly appointed in the Center for Gerontological Studies and the Department of Psychology. “Scientists used to think of memory as a video recorder and everything was in there absolutely perfectly, but the idea of a water-color, impressionistic view is more true to life.”

Researchers have been studying memory for more than 100 years, but although science has discovered a lot about other types of memory functions, autobiographical memory still presents many mysteries. In her Life Story Lab, Bluck and undergraduate and graduate student researchers are investigating autobiographical memory across the lifespan and hoping to discover how and why people are able to remember so many of the events of their own lives.

“The miraculous, delightful thing about memory is that we don’t leave things behind like many other animals do—it’s an incredible gift we have as humans,” Bluck says. “My research focus has been to ask the question, why do we have such a huge number of personal memories? Why did we develop in this way that we have this amazing capacity for long-term memory and reflection? We remember things that happened 20, 50, 80 years ago. What is it for?”

The lab currently has several ongoing projects and international collaborations, including the Emotion in Memory Project, Life Events Project and the Thinking About Life Experiences Project. In a series of studies on the wisdom of experience, Bluck is collaborating with Judith Glück in Austria to examine how people remember wisdom experiences from their own lives. Participants of different ages are asked to think of a time they did or said something wise and then comment on whether they learned from the event. Bluck says the evidence suggests that people generally don’t

begin to use memory as a directive, learning from an event and applying that wisdom to new situations, until around age 30. “We have found that, in adolescence, people aren’t learning as much from their memories or generalizing them so they can be used across a variety of situations,” she says.

Another interesting study in the Life Story Lab is one that recent psychology graduate Nicole Alea designed for her dissertation research, Using Autobiographical Memory for Intimacy. The project sampled 129 participants in long-term relationships and had them share two memories about their relationship with their partner—one about a romantic date and the other about a vacation. The participants were measured on how close they felt to their spouse before and after sharing two positive memories about them.

We wanted to see whether autobiographical memory could enhance intimacy in a relationship,” says Alea, who, after earning her PhD in August, is now an assistant professor at the University of North Carolina, Wilmington. “What we found is yes, remembering events about a loved one helps to enhance intimacy. It is similar to Thanksgiving dinner—after you sit around and share memories with your loved ones, you feel closer to them.” Alea was awarded a National Research Service Award in support of the project.

Current psychology graduate student Jacqueline Baron has received a Best Master’s Proposal Award





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 —Susan Bluck

from the American Psychological Association’s Division on Adult Development and Aging for her Storytelling Project, in which she examines autobiographical memory stories to determine who makes better storytellers, younger or older adults. In mid-February, Baron completed a data collection in which 16 older and younger adults read and evaluated over 100 autobiographical stories and rated them for overall quality and then on specific dimensions, such as emotion and coherence.

“It addresses a paradox in the literature and stereotypes in society,” Baron says. “Cognitive

aging literature often compares older and younger adults, and usually finds that younger adults are better at telling a story that is detailed and stays on topic, but people prefer older adults’ stories more overall. So my hunch is that those characteristics make up a good story, but they are not everything.”

Bluck says two factors that have been shown to make an event memorable over a lifetime are the emotional state at the time it occurred and its novelty. Also, retelling an event to other people preserves it in our minds. When asked to look back on their lives, older adults recall the

greatest number of memories from age 10 to 30. Strong emotional memories evoked by a particular smell or song are often from events that occurred in this time period.

Bluck, who came to UF in 2000 upon completion of a post-doctoral fellowship at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin, received her PhD in psychology and social behavior from the University of California, Irvine in 1997. She said she was drawn to work in autobiographical memory because it is “so completely common in everyday life, and also offers such great theoretical chal-

lenges to understanding memory function.”

“We know that memory does all kinds of things for us as humans, regardless of our age,” she says. “It helps us maintain a sense of who we are, create intimacy with friends, provide empathy with strangers, and set goals for the future. I sometimes have a philosophical inkling that if we could fully embrace memory as a resource, it may have the potential to take us to a new level of humanity.”

For more on this research visit, www.psych.ufl.edu/lifestorylab.

—Buffy Lockette

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On the Cover:

The Life Story Lab, directed by Assistant Professor of Gerontology and Psychology Susan Bluck, is conducting research on people's life memories, in order to determine the role autobiographical memory plays in self identity and continuity, relationships and social well-being, and directing future plans and goals. See page 6.