

Remembering and Telling: Narrative Coherence and Phenomenal Aspects of Autobiographical Memories

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Abstract

Investigated the relationship between phenomenal qualities of autobiographical memories and narrative structure of written reports of them. In Experiment 1, 30 undergraduates provided 2 reports, the most momentous event of their lives (MPE) and their earliest childhood recollection (ECR). Reports were coded for 2 variables: narrative coherence (NC), and event specificity (SP). No significant relationship was found between NC and SP, nor between SP and type of event. Experiment 2 asked 40 undergraduates to report MPEs and correlated NC and subjective ratings of events from the Autobiographical Memory Questionnaire (AMQ): vividness of imagery, recollection, importance, consequences, and rehearsal. A significant correlation between importance rating and the orientation index points out to the flashbulb aspect of the memories. Significant correlation between volume report and recollection indicates an interaction between higher indices of recollection and individual's predisposition to report the event in written form. Results did not corroborate a hypothesis of identity between autobiographical memory representation and expression.

Keywords: Autobiographical memory; Phenomenology; Conscious recollection; Narrative coherence; Specificity.

Lembrar e Dizer: Coerência Narrativa e Características Fenomenais de Memórias Autobiográficas

Resumo

Investigou-se a relação entre qualidades fenomenais de memórias autobiográficas e estrutura narrativa dos relatos escritos. No Experimento 1, 30 estudantes universitários forneceram 2 relatos, o evento pessoal mais marcante de suas vidas (EPM) e a sua primeira lembrança infantil (PLI). Os relatos foram codificados para 2 variáveis: coerência narrativa (CN) e especificidade do evento (EE). Nenhuma relação significativa foi encontrada entre CN e EE, ou entre EE e tipo de evento recordado. No Experimento 2, pediu-se a 40 estudantes universitários que relatassem o EPM, e correlacionou-se CN a avaliações subjetivas sobre os eventos através do Questionário de Memória Autobiográfica (QMA): vivacidade de imaginação, recordação consciente, importância, consequências e ensaio. A correlação significativa entre a classificação de importância e o índice de orientações em CN aponta para o aspecto das memórias tipo *flashbulb*. A correlação significativa entre o tamanho dos relatos a recordação consciente indica interação entre recordar com maior intensidade e predisposição para relatar o evento em forma escrita. Os resultados não corroboram a hipótese de identidade entre a representação da memória autobiográfica e a expressão do seu conteúdo.

Palavras-chave: Memória autobiográfica; Fenomenologia; Recordação consciente; Coerência narrativa; Especificidade.

The fact that some unique events are remembered vividly, after long delays, and usually accompanied by high emotionality, is well documented (see McGaugh,

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2003, for a review). Those memories have been defined as benchmark memories (Elnick, Margrett, Fitzgerald, & Labouvie-Vief, 1999), vivid memories (Rubin & Kozin, 1984), personal flashbulb memories (Thomsen & Berntsen, 2003), nuclear episodes (McAdams, 1985), self-defining memories (Singer & Salovey, 1993), or momentous events (Pillemer, 1998). In this study, those memories will be called momentous events, pointing out their individual importance and meaning.

Momentous event memories, as is the case with other manifestations of autobiographical memory, are represented in consciousness with a uniquely past-oriented phenomenal sense of recollection (Wheeler, Stuss, & Tulving, 1997), and accompanied by vivid imagery and reinstatement of emotions (Greenberg & Rubin, 2003). Besides being able to consciously remember autobiographical events, we can recount them and convey qualities of our conscious experiences through many forms and modalities of expression. The most familiar and perhaps most efficient of those forms is verbal communication, be it in oral or written form (Engelmann, 1997).

Between the respective abilities of remembering an event and telling others about it, an essential question remains, of how memory representations of events are connected to, or distinct from, the memory narratives by which the subject relates the events (Wang & Conway, 2004). Most models of that relationship share the assumption that the way narratives about events are recounted reflect the way those events are represented in memory (Fivush, Haden, & Adam, 1995). However, few studies have explored the relationship between phenomenal qualities of memories, that is, judgments that grant them with personal importance, and the narrative expression of the same memories. In this study, we ask the general question of whether narrative coherence of the narrative report of an event will correspond to characteristics of the inner representation in consciousness of the event memory as rated by the subject. In other terms we are asking if the story told portrays phenomenal aspects of the memory experience.

Whereas there is almost universal agreement that coherence is conceptually significant, there is as yet no agreed upon definition or measure of narrative coherence in the literature (Fivush, 2007). Across multiple theoretical formulations of coherence, Fivush (2007) argues that three dimensions contributes to overall coherence: (a) context, i.e., orienting the narrative in place and time, (b) chronology, i.e., relating the component actions along a comprehensible timeline, and (c) theme, i.e., maintaining topic and providing a sense of rising action with a resolution and/or final point to the story.

In this study, narrative coherence (NC) was assessed through partially applying the model and coding schemes used by Fivush et al. (1995) and by Peterson and Biggs (1998). The model points out three main factors for granting coherence to a narrative: orientations, actions (or referentials), and evaluations. Each of those categories is represented by respective propositions in the text. In this model, the operational definition of coherence is that narratives with more orientations and evaluations were more coherent because the narrated events were embedded within a richer descriptive and evaluative context. The model emphasizes orientation and evaluation propositions as necessary complements for telling events that otherwise would lack coherence and thus would be less understandable. Orientation propositions, by transmitting information about the setting, characters, and background of the event, provide the receiver with a means for construing the adequate context against which the event and its elements are to be interpreted. Through evaluation propositions, those referring to the rememberer's thoughts and feelings about the event, he conveys the relevance of the event and of reporting it.

The problem was addressed by two experiments. The aim of the first, preliminary experiment, was to compare narrative coherence of momentous event memories to another kind of autobiographical memory. We asked participants to write down two autobiographical events: the most important event of their lives, and their earliest childhood recollection. Through this task, will be investigated if the earliest recollection has less vivid imagery and higher uncertainty regarding recollection features than momentous events. Coherence indices and length of narrative were compared by task and by event specificity. In the second experiment, we asked participants to write down a momentous event from their lives and to rate the memory of the event in scales of the *Autobiographical Memory Questionnaire* (AMQ), referring to phenomenal qualities and component cognitive processes of the memory and properties of the event (Rubin, Schrauf, & Greenberg, 2003). The subjective rating scales include items such as imagery, language components, story coherence, and emotions.

We derive the main hypothesis that guides the present study on two grounds: (a) the assumption that expression reflects representation, and (b) the above description of narrative elements and phenomenal qualities of memories. In that sense, if the expression is identical to the representation the subject has available for rating, it is expected that reflective properties of event ratings will correlate with higher indexes of evaluative propositions. On the other hand, perceptual and contextual ratings would correlate with reports presenting predominantly orientation propositions.

Autobiographical Memory: Narratives and Representations

Few studies have inquired the relationship between the narrative aspects of reporting autobiographical memories and the subjective, or phenomenal, qualities of the memories experienced by the individual when recollecting the memories. Relations between memory representations and memory narratives are dynamic and interactive (Wang & Conway, 2004). Retrieval contexts were found to influence the extent to which memory reports reflect the memory representations, by means of discrepancies in the individual's mental state from encoding to retrieval (Wang & Ross, 2005). Memory narratives might vary as the individual focuses on different aspects of the memory according to the retrieval mode employed, due to changes in the social and physical contexts of retrieval, or to the passage of time. Moreover, through that interactive relationship, memory reports may also alter memory representations.

Bauer, Stennes and Haight (2003) found few relations between individuals' ratings of autobiographical memories and their use of internal states terms (emotional, cognitive, perceptual and physiological) in reporting those events. Women's data showed some correlations between internal states terms and ratings, but only for remote memories. In men's reports objective detail seemed to substitute for subjective evaluation, and they strip their reports of mentions to affective and cognitive impacts of the event. That criterion corresponds to one of the narrative categories addressed in this study, the evaluation index.

Only one recent study probed the correlation of narrative aspects of reports and phenomenal ratings of autobiographical events (Bohanek, Fivush, & Walker, 2005). They compared structure and content of narratives of emotional events and women's subjective ratings of the memories. Content of reports was coded for word count, negative and positive emotion words, and processing words. Narrative coherence was assessed through coding for chronology (temporal order of the event) and completeness (amount of details provided, lack of event parts). Those two measures were highly correlated, and one overall coherence rating was drawn, as a scale from 1 to 4. Subjective rating scales were frequency of rehearsal, significance, uniqueness, emotionality, and vividness of the event. Only seven out of 172 bivariate correlations between narrative variables and rating scales yielded significant results. The authors argue that the negative result may be due more to methodological issues than explainable by a theoretical account. They claim that narrative variables of reports and phenomenal ratings of memories should both be taken into account, since both provide relevant information, although referring to different aspects of autobiographical memory.

Narrative Structure and Phenomenal Ratings

Narrative structure of autobiographical reports has been addressed by numerous studies, mainly in the reminiscence literature, and is argued to be a central issue in autobiographical memory, especially regarding its organization. Phenomenal qualities have also been an active line of research, as in source monitoring literature (D'Argembeau, Comblain, & Van Der Linden, 2003; Johnson, Hashtroudi, & Lindsay, 1993) and in the components of processing framework (Rubin et al., 2003). Hypotheses on the correlation between narrative structure and phenomenal ratings can bring light to explaining the relationship between memory representation and memory expression (Wang & Conway, 2004).

Phenomenal Ratings of Autobiographical Events and the Component Processes Framework

A component processes framework (CPF) for autobiographical memory has been proposed by Rubin and colleagues (Greenberg & Rubin, 2003; Rubin & Siegler, 2004; Rubin et al., 2003). The CPF views autobiographical memory abilities as products of the interaction of three groups of cognitive processes: (a) recollection and belief, (b) imagery components, and (c) reported properties of events (Gauer & Gomes, in press). Those processes correspond to key features present in theoretical definitions of autobiographical and episodic memory and recollective experience, and are based on behavioral and neuropsychological data (Greenberg & Rubin, 2003).

The recollection and belief dimension of the CPF accounts for the subjective states that characterize the experience of recalling unique past events that happened at particular times and places: a sense of reliving and of traveling back to the time of the event, a belief that the event actually happened in the way it is being remembered, and a sense of actually remembering the event as opposed to merely knowing it happened. Among the key cognitive processes involved in autobiographical memory are those related to imagery components in different modalities (visual, multi-modal spatial, and auditory). Those processes also comprise the reinstatement of the emotions the subject had when first experienced the original event; language, given that events can be remembered mostly in words instead of images; and narrative, since events can be remembered as coherent stories or as less organized fragments of episodes. Autobiographical events and the memories that refer to them are attributed with features through meta-cognitive judgments (Rubin & Siegler, 2004). The reported properties of events or memories are attributed by the subject based on information from the cognitive processes and current reflective judgments about the event: for example, vividness of imagery might lead to

judge an event as recent, and narrative coherence might be related to having frequently rehearsed the story. They include the amount of personal importance the subject attributes to the event; frequency of rehearsal, both overt (having talked with people about the event) and covert (having thought about the event); event specificity – being unique in time and space, extended across a larger period, or merging similar events (Rubin et al., 2003); and event age, or the estimation of the date in which it occurred. Other properties that can be attributed to personal events are those that characterize flashbulb, or vivid, memories (Brown & Kulik, 1977/2000; Rubin & Kozin, 1984). Vivid memory phenomena were operationalized by Thomsen and Berntsen (2003) into a group of characteristics, derived from Brown and Kulik's work: (a) vividness and (b) presence of details in the memory; (c) personal importance, (d) unusualness, (e) emotionality, and (f) perceived consequences of the event; and (g) amount rehearsal of the event memory, both in thought and conversation.

The operationalization of the vivid memory phenomenon is a relevant addition to understanding and explaining key features of momentous event memories. Flashbulb characteristics are mostly properties the subject attributes to the original event he is recollecting, somewhat in the way judgments about the reality of the event as approached in the source monitoring framework (Johnson et al., 1993). Those judgments, according to the framework, are strongly based on the phenomenal qualities of the memory, especially perceptual and contextual information. In that sense, flashbulb judgments seem to be more systematic, or reflective (Rubin & Siegler, 2004), than the swift judgments of reality and source.

Two experiments were designed in order to investigate the relationship between narrative structure of momentous event reports and subjective characteristics of the memories they refer to. Experiment 1 was a preliminary study aimed at exploring the relationship between event specificity, length of narrative, and the NC indexes in two types of tasks: remembering the most important event of participants' lives and their earliest childhood recollections. In Experiment 2, a group of subjective ratings of momentous event memories were correlated to NC indexes in the reports of the same events. The hypothesis for Experiment 2 is that if narrative structure of the reports directly reflects the phenomenal experience ratings, it is expected that reports with predominantly orientation propositions will correspond to significantly higher phenomenal ratings in the variables setting and recollection. In that same direction, reports with predominance of evaluation propositions will have significantly higher ratings of flashbulb judgments (reflexive judgments).

Experiment 1: Narrative Coherence and Specificity in Memories of Momentous Events and Earliest Childhood Recollections

Method

Participants

Thirty undergraduate students in a southern Brazil public university took part in this study. Participants aged from 17 to 33 (mean=20.8; $SD=5.45$), and 19 of them were women (63.3%). Most participants (26) were psychology freshmen.

Materials and Procedure

Participants were invited in their classroom to take part as voluntaries in a study on autobiographical memory. They signed two copies of a Term of Informed Consent, in concordance with the guidelines from the ethical committee of the university. No students declined to participate. A five-minute activity was used to provide relaxation and to prone participants to recollection of personal events. They were instated by the researcher (the first author) to relax and think back to events that happened yesterday; then successively, in intervals of approximately 45 seconds: the day before yesterday, last week, last month, last year, and finally throughout their lives. Each participant had been given a booklet containing one page with demographical questions; one page with instructions to recall and write down the most important event from the ones they remembered in the activity; one page with instructions to recall and write down their earliest childhood recollection; and one page with questions regarding the earliest recollection. The questions following the earliest recollection were taken from Wang (2001).

Coding Criteria

Written reports were coded for three variables – event specificity, narrative coherence, and event domains – according to the following criteria:

Event Specificity (ES). Each report was coded into one of three categories, corresponding to the AMQ item that addresses specificity (Rubin et al., 2003): (a) memory refers to an event that happened one at a given time and place (specific); (b) memory refers to a merge of similar events (merge); or (c) memory refers to an event that extended for more than one day (extended).

Narrative Coherence (NC). Each report was broken down into propositions (subject-noun constructions), and propositions were coded into three mutually exclusive categories (Fivush et al., 1995; Peterson & Biggs, 1998): (a) orientations, (b) actions and (c) evaluations. However, we analyzed data in a different fashion than the previous studies on which the coding scheme is based. Whereas

they counted the frequency of proposition types as a within-subjects variable to compare different experimental sessions, we calculated three indexes – one for each narrative structure category – through dividing the number of propositions in that category by the total of propositions of the report. The resulting proportions of propositions in each category were transformed into percentages for the purpose of clearness in the presentation.

Two coders (the first and second authors) categorized 20 reports, reaching acceptable levels of concordance in all three coding criteria. Reasonable Kappa levels were obtained, ranging from .70 to .82. Coding of reports throughout the experiment was done by the second author.

Results

Task and specificity were probed as factors in means differences through t tests and ANOVA, respectively. Means and results of t tests are presented in Table 1. The NC variables that showed significant differences in scores between the two tasks were the orientation index ($t = 4.46$; $p < .01$), with a higher mean for the earliest recollection task; and evaluation index ($t = 5.66$; $p < .01$), with higher mean for the momentous event task.

Results by specificity are summarized in Table 2. In the comparison by specificity, reports of events that lasted extended periods had significantly bigger length than other types of reports ($F = 3.57$; $p < .05$), as well as a higher evaluations index ($F = 4.40$; $p < .05$).

Table 1
t Test, Mean Length of Narrative, Mean Indexes and Standard Errors by Task

	Task		
	Momentous	Earliest	t (29)
	Mean (SE)	Mean (SE)	
length of narrative	8.21 (.97)	6.11 (.81)	1.67
Orientations index	31.32 (4.83)	64.50 (5.66)	4.46 *
Referentials index	18.89 (3.41)	25.07 (4.81)	1.05
Evaluations index	49.75 (6.46)	10.46 (2.54)	5.66 *

Note. * = .01.

Table 2
ANOVA, Mean Length of Narrative, Mean Indexes and Standard Errors by Specificity

	Specificity			F (1,39)
	Once	Merge	Extended	
	Mean (SE)	Mean (SE)	Mean (SE)	
length of narrative	6.22 (.78)	4.25 (.48)	9.25 (1.15)	3.57 *
Orientations index	56.19 (5.91)	44.50 (12.22)	35.35 (6.39)	2.75
Referentials index	21.25 (4.32)	44.25 (9.82)	18.70 (3.58)	2.39
Evaluations index	22.56 (5.60)	11.25 (6.58)	45.95 (6.92)	4.40 *

Experiment 2: Narrative Coherence and Phenomenal Qualities of Momentous Event Memories

Method

Participants

Forty undergraduate students at a public university in southern Brazil, of whom 36 were women (85.7%), aging from 17 to 44 (mean age = 21.6; $SD=3.64$).

Twenty-five participants were Nursing majors and the others were Dentistry majors.

Materials and Procedure

Participants were invited in their respective classrooms to take part as voluntaries in a study about autobiographical memory. At all times data was collected by the first author. As they agreed to participate, participants signed a Term of Informed Consent according to the university ethical committee requirements. No

prospective participants declined to participate. Participants were told that autobiographical memory is about personally experienced events, and that this study was about specific events, that is, unique episodes that happened at a given time and place. At the classroom, participants received a booklet containing a brief demographic survey asking for their sex, age. Following was a page with instructions to recall a momentous event from their lives and report it in the space below (approximately 20 lines in A4 paper). In the next page started the questionnaire consisting of 18 AMQ questions (Rubin et al., 2003), and five additional questions about flashbulb characteristics (Thomsen & Berntsen, 2003). In half of the booklets the task instructions asked the participant to recall a momentous event that happened within the last 12 months, while the others asked for a momentous event that happened more than 12 months ago.

The coding criteria for the momentous events reports are the same as in Experiment 1, with the exception that the specificity category was not coded, for it was part of the questionnaire answered by the participants. The second author did all coding in this experiment.

Subjective ratings on the AMQ included recollection (average of relive and back in time); rehearsal (average of thought and talked); setting; in words; story; important; emotional event; consequences; unusual; and says much about me. AMQ ratings were correlated to the three narrative structure indexes – orientation, action, evaluation, and overall length of narrative in propositions. A statistical significance level of .05 was maintained throughout the analyses.

Results

The momentous event memory reports had an average of 10.93 propositions ($SD = 7.77$), ranging from 1 to 37 propositions in total. In average, orientations accounted for 43.66% of propositions, actions for 24.07%, and evaluations, 32.31%. There were reports formed exclusively of orientation propositions and of evaluation propositions, but no reports had only action propositions. The medium age of the memories was of 558.95 days ($SD = 766.87$), within a range from 25 to 3930 days.

Significant correlations were found between AMQ ratings and narrative structure. We found a marginal positive correlation ($r = .257$; $p = .05$) between proportion of orientation propositions in the report and importance rating; a negative correlation between orientation index and unusual event ($r = -.305$; $p < .05$); a positive correlation between the action index and the subjective rating in words ($r = .357$; $p < .05$); and a negative correlation between evaluation index and rating of setting ($r = -.288$; $p < .05$). The length of narrative in propositions was positively correlated with the AMQ variables recollection ($r = .265$; $p < .05$) and in words ($r = .401$; $p < .01$).

The AMQ variable story did not correlate significantly to any of the narrative indexes, but did so with another AMQ variable, in words ($r = .332$; $p < .05$). The variable important also did not show a significant correlation to any of the narrative indexes, but with rehearsal ($r = .439$; $p < .01$).

General Discussion

Our data did not corroborate the hypotheses concerning a direct relationship between aspects of the mental representation of autobiographical memories and the narrative coherence of their report. Moreover, it must be noticed that the correlations were contrary to what would be expected. First, the lack of significant correlation between the orientations index and the vividness and recollection variables is the opposite that would be predictable: a report mostly comprised of orientation propositions would expectedly correspond to a recollection with a great amount of sensorial and contextual information, but that was not the case. Second, the positive correlation between event importance and the NC index of orientations is somewhat surprising, especially in the face of no correlation of importance to the evaluations index. Maintaining the direct relationship hypothesis, one would expect that events rated as most important would correspond to reports predominantly evaluative. Once again, that hypothesis was not confirmed. Nonetheless, the correlation might be pointing out to the operationalization of momentous events as flashbulb memories. In that view, the quasi-sensorial vividness of imagery during recollection relates to judgments of personal relevance, among other flashbulb characteristics (Thomsen & Berntsen, 2003).

Regarding the narrative aspects of autobiographical memory, no correlation was found between the subjective rating referring to recalling the event as a coherent story and any of the narrative indexes, nor with length of narrative. Although we had no specific hypothesis concerning that relationship, it would be fair to expect at least a positive correlation with the orientation index, since the presence of orientation propositions are considered to be greatly linked to understandability of narrative reports (Peterson & Biggs, 1998). It must be noticed there is an important dissociation within the CPF: the variable in words is related to the language processes, whereas story relates to narrative organization.

The positive correlation between length of narrative and the recollection ratings might be indicative of an important interaction of the phenomenal sense of recollecting, which defines autobiographical memory of specific events (Greenberg & Rubin, 2003), and the participant's disposition to verbally convey the event. The relatively predominance of negative results found in this investigation do not necessarily determine that

there is no relationship between the phenomenal qualities of autobiographical memories, reported properties of events, and narrative structure of reports of the events. Narrative criteria present numerous models, as well as other aspects than the orientation, action, and evaluation classification of propositions. Moreover, the task used in this study might pose difficulties for the interpretation of the results: asking for momentous events might have artificially tended the reports sample towards evaluations. Thus, further studies using other types of tasks, and analyzing reports according to different criteria, are encouraged. Nonetheless, the negative results agree with studies such as that of Bohanek et al. (2005), who found no relationship between phenomenal qualities and narrative structure of reports.

Limitations to the interpretability of the results here presented have to do mainly with the relative lack of control for individual differences variables. Most noticeably, we did not control for differences in narrative and verbal skills. Moreover, it was also not possible to control for the participants' motivation for taking part in the experiments. As with most psychological research conducted in Brazil, extremely constrained research budgets do not allow researchers to provide any benefit in exchange for participants' time and effort.

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