

Central and peripheral perspectives in autobiographical memory

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In some memories, I now see myself in the past scene, with the events playing out as from an observer's perspective. In other cases, I remember the episode as from my original perspective, now inhabiting the same perspective as I did then. Many people can switch or flip between these two ways of remembering the same past experiences, or perhaps even somehow blend or fuse these external and internal perspectives simultaneously. As I recall one particular incident in the school playground, I look up at the high walls and around at the confused crowd of kids as if from my six-year-old vantage point: then, suddenly, I seem to be occupying another perspective, high and to the side of the whole scene, looking down on myself among the noisy milling crew.

Since Freud, these dual or rather multiple points of view in autobiographical memory have served to underline what are now familiar messages about the constructive nature of recall: remembering is often a furiously active process, evading control, rather than the deliberate retrieval of some static item that was waiting there all along. Thus arise the personal and political challenges of forging room for memories still to make real claims on the past, to maintain what the philosopher Sue Campbell (2014) called a fidelity to events we can now only piece together from present traces. Yet the phenomena of perspective taking in memory raise more puzzles than either psychologists or film theorists have acknowledged. How do the spatial aspects of memory relate to its other modalities? How are distinctions between central and peripheral features of past events constructed and contested?

Richard Wollheim (1984) uses the term "centered event memory" for cases in which I adopt an "own-eyes" or "field" perspective on the experienced past. Wollheim was well aware that memory is not exclusively a visual or visuo-spatial phenomenon, that, as well as its other sensory dimensions, there are emotional, embodied or kinesthetic perspectives. Yet, like many theorists across the disciplines, he still tended to privilege such "centered" memory experiences as fundamental or somehow more tightly tethered to reality, treating the adoption of external, peripheral or observer perspectives as unstable or marginal phenomena.

The visuo-spatial aspects of memory experience are real, although operating very differently across individuals, contexts and cultures. But, as Peter Goldie (2012) shows,

they need not coincide with memory's other modalities. My emotional identifications with my past self, or my visceral sense of embodied engagement with that me-child in the playground, can be intense even as my external visual perspective offers me some distance, some possibility of abstraction or narrative. What might appear to be "peripheral" modes of access to the past can also form rich and transformative parts of memory experience if we acknowledge the internal complexity and multiplicity of the "first person."

The interiority or the "warm antiquity of self" with which autobiographical memory is often associated thus appears as a context-sensitive and perhaps culturally fragile achievement. It is built both on integrated sensory-affective-kinetic forms of access to the past and on fluctuating perspectives on particular past experiences. Just as, at a different scale, group memory encompasses conflict and heterogeneity among internally diverse collectives, so the "centered" personal memories on which we rightly rely are constructed or pulled together from complex interwoven multimodal sources and fragments.

REFERENCES

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