

Autobiographical Memory and Conceptions of Self: Getting Better All the Time

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Abstract

We examine links between self-assessment and autobiographical memory. People generally view themselves as improving over time, relative to their peers. We suggest that this sense of improvement is sometimes illusory, and motivated by the desire to enhance the current self. Our research focuses on people's subjective feeling of temporal distance between an earlier period and the present, a feeling that is only modestly associated with actual time. Research participants praise or criticize the same former self, depending on how far away it feels. An equally distant episode feels close or remote, depending on whether it has favorable or damaging implications for evaluations of the current self. The identical achievement boosts evaluations of the current self or has little impact, depending on how far away it feels. The same failure does or does not harm appraisals of the current self, depending on how far away it feels.

Keywords

subjective time; self-assessment; temporal self-appraisal

At the age of 60, actor Mary Tyler Moore offered the following evaluation of the stages in her life: "Of all the lives that I have lived, I would have to say that this one is my favorite. I am proud that I have developed into a kinder person than I ever thought I would be" (Gerosa, 1997, p. 83). We have found a similar tendency to praise current selves and belittle past selves in autobiographies. In his memoirs, Koestler (1952) observed that people ridicule former selves:

The gauche adolescent, the foolish young man that one has been, appears so grotesque in retrospect and so detached from one's own identity that one automatically treats him with amused derision. It is a callous betrayal, yet one cannot help being a traitor to one's past. (p. 96)

This observation is intriguing, because today becomes yesterday. The current exemplary self seems less praiseworthy in retrospect.

TEMPORAL SELF-APPRAISAL THEORY

When we began to study people's evaluations of their current and former selves, there was plenty of psychological research showing that individuals are typically impressed with their present selves (Baumeister, 1998), but little research on people's evaluations of what they were like in the past. There were at least two

psychological reasons to suppose that most people would also be frustrated with their former selves. If, as social psychologists often assume, individuals are motivated to think highly of themselves, why would they criticize a former self? It might be even easier for people to imagine perfection in the past than in the present, because there is less evidence to challenge their claims. Also, psychologists have argued that to maintain a coherent self-view, people make their recollections of themselves consistent with their current self-view (Albert, 1977). Both theory and research implied that people who see themselves as exemplary now should recall themselves as always having been outstanding.

Yet we kept noticing that people seemed rather unimpressed with their past selves. Why and when do people criticize earlier selves? Although Koestler considered his self-criticism to be a betrayal, Orwell (1946) regarded a harsh retrospective evaluation as a realistic appraisal: "Autobiography is only to be trusted when it reveals something disgraceful. A man who gives a good account of himself is probably lying, since any life when viewed from the inside is simply a series of defeats" (p. 170). Do people remove their rose-colored glasses when they glance backward in time, appraising former selves and deeds impartially?

We were intrigued by the possibility that individuals who are supposedly motivated to think highly of themselves disparage former selves. How common is such criticism? Does it occur only when merited or accurate? How are people's current self-views affected by their criticism of past selves? We have tried to answer these questions in our theory of temporal self-appraisal and associated research.

A couple of terms are central to our analyses. First, consider the demarcation between present and past selves. The tiny point in time that is actually "right now" is not what people mean when they refer to the present. People create a more extended present by assimilating earlier instances into it. Philosophers label this contracting of successive events into a single instant the *specious present* (James, 1890/1950, p. 609). Extending the breadth of the specious present to suit their purposes, people speak of the present minute, week, year, and so forth. In our studies, we typically assess the present self by asking people to describe what they are like currently and over the past couple of weeks. Although 2 weeks is clearly an arbitrary division, it is an interlude that our participants comfortably incorporate into the present. We also ask participants what they were like in the more distant past, months and years earlier. Although we consider the targets of these retrospective assessments to be former selves of the participants, the identification of former selves is also complicated. People can think of a former self as extended in time (their teenage self) or more limited (their 18-year-old self or their self last New Year's Eve). In our experiments, we ask people to evaluate themselves at a specific time in the past.

We use the label *subjective temporal distance* to refer to how far away people feel from past selves. People's reactions to former selves are strongly affected by how far away they feel from those selves (Ross & Wilson, 2000; Wilson & Ross, in press). People feel remote and detached from some former selves and close and connected to other past selves. We suppose that subjective temporal distance and actual time are correlated. In general, events that happened 1 year ago feel closer than episodes that occurred 10 years ago. Along with many psy-

chology— including William James, we also suggest that the relation between subjective and actual time is imperfect. People can feel close to past selves (and associated events) from 10 years ago (e.g., their wedding day) and far from past selves (and associated episodes) from 1 year ago (e.g., their last birthday).

We propose that people are motivated to evaluate their past selves in a way that makes them feel good about themselves now. Typically, people are motivated to evaluate subjectively recent past selves favorably, especially when considering important attributes. People can continue to take credit for achievements of past selves that feel close. By praising past selves to whom they feel connected, they also compliment their current self. They cannot continue forever to bask in the glory of their earlier triumphs, however. As specific achievements (and associated selves) feel farther and farther away, the attainments shine less brightly on the current self. Subjectively distant successes feel as if they belong almost exclusively to earlier selves. Similarly, as failures or transgressions feel farther and farther away, individuals might view their current self as less blameworthy.

EVALUATING PRESENT AND PAST SELVES

In our research, we examined various groups of people, including Canadian and Japanese university students, middle-aged Canadians, and celebrities interviewed in magazines, to better understand people's evaluations of current and past selves. In each sample, people evaluated their present self as superior to their former selves (e.g., Wilson & Ross, 2001). Japanese students were less enamored with themselves than were their Canadian counterparts, but both groups evaluated their current self more favorably than earlier selves. Similarly, middle-aged participants' ratings of their social skills, common sense, and self-confidence indicated that they viewed themselves as improving steadily with age.

Participants in our studies considered their own self-improvement to be greater than that of their peers. At age 50, middle-aged participants regarded themselves as even better than their peers than they were at age 20. Similarly, university students described themselves as more superior to their peers currently than they had been at age 16 (Wilson & Ross, 2001).

Perhaps most people do learn from experience and get better with age—even if they cannot all improve more than their peers. We suspected, however, that the derogation of former selves is not fully explained by actual improvement or even the wisdom of hindsight. When we studied a group of participants over time, we found that they perceived personal improvement where none had actually occurred (Wilson & Ross, 2001). To explain this illusory improvement, we focused on the concept of subjective temporal distance. The theory of temporal self-appraisal suggests that evaluations of former selves should become increasingly unfavorable as those selves feel farther away, even if actual temporal distance does not change. In one experiment, we altered participants' subjective experience of temporal distance by describing the same point in time as either recent or fairly distant. As anticipated, participants were more critical of their former self when it felt farther away. According to the theory of temporal self-appraisal, people are especially motivated to perceive improvement on important attributes, because these attributes have a particularly great impact on self-eval-

uation. As expected, we found that criticism of distant past selves is more pronounced on important characteristics than on less important characteristics.

Simple hindsight or actual improvement cannot explain these findings. Participants in the "near" and "far" conditions evaluated the very same past self. The difference in evaluation due to variations in subjective time cannot be warranted on objective grounds. Also, the finding for important versus unimportant characteristics seems counterintuitive. People were most critical of subjectively distant past selves on the very traits that they cared most about. Our explanation is that such criticism of past selves allows people to feel better about their current performance on important dimensions.

To show that people regard criticism of past selves as benefiting the current self, we asked participants to write either accurate or flattering self-descriptions. Participants writing flattering descriptions were more likely than those who wrote accurate descriptions to include an inferior past self in their self-descriptions (Wilson & Ross, 2000). Apparently, people suppose that contrasting their present self to a lesser earlier self enhances how the present self looks.

If people are motivated to self-enhance, why do they not inflate their assessment of their current self rather than derogate subjectively distant former selves? People do boost their present self, but there are psychological advantages to downgrading the past rather than dramatically inflating the present. When people artificially enhance their current self, their self-evaluation may become implausibly inconsistent with objective standards. Retrospective criticism allows individuals to be relatively satisfied with even a mediocre present evaluation. A man may regard himself as too shy, but much more outgoing than he used to be.

SUBJECTIVE DISTANCE FROM PAST EVENTS

So far, we have described how variations in actual and subjective temporal distance affect people's evaluations of a past self. We also theorize that feelings of subjective distance help people to maintain favorable current self-views. Individuals should be motivated to feel farther from past failings than from equally distant achievements. A student who performed poorly on an exam 2 weeks ago should feel more distant from the exam than a student who performed well on the same test. Both students might be fully aware of the date of their exam, but their experience of subjective distance should differ. By attributing a subjectively distant failure to an inferior, former self (the "old me"), individuals can shield their current self from blame. In contrast, people can continue to claim credit for former accomplishments by feeling close to such episodes. Subjectively recent accomplishments "belong" to the present self almost as much as to an earlier self.

In our research, we have examined feelings of subjective distance from past episodes that could have negative or positive implications for the current self. In one study (Ross & Wilson, 2002), we randomly assigned participants to remember the course in which they received either their best or their worst grade the previous term. After reporting their grade, participants indicated how distant they felt from the target course on a scale with endpoints labeled "feels like yesterday" and "feels far away." Participants who obtained a relatively low grade felt farther from the course than did those who received a high grade,

even though the actual passage of time was the same in the two conditions. Across a number of studies, subjective distance was only modestly related to actual temporal distance from positive and negative personal experiences.

SUBJECTIVE DISTANCE OF PAST OUTCOMES AND EVALUATION OF THE CURRENT SELF

We assume that the subjective distance of past outcomes affects evaluations of the current self. For example, people should evaluate their current self more favorably if an achievement such as an academic award feels close, rather than far away. To examine whether subjective distance has this effect on self-evaluation, we experimentally varied people's feelings of distance from past outcomes (Wilson, 2000; Wilson & Ross, in press). We altered feelings of subjective distance by changing representations of the spatial distance between two points on a time line. University students were presented with a time line that spanned either many years (e.g., birth to today) or only the fairly recent past (e.g., age 16 to today) and were instructed to locate and mark a target event on the time line. As Figure 1 illustrates, they tended to place an event (in this case, their last semester of high school) much closer to "today" when the time line spanned many rather than a few years. Most important, we found that the students felt subjectively closer to events the nearer they placed those events to the present on the time line.

Using the time line as a tool, we encouraged some participants to feel subjectively close to a failure (by having them locate the episode on a time line spanning many years) and other participants to feel far away from the failure (by having them place the episode on a time line spanning only a few years). As anticipated, respondents who felt close to former failures evaluated their current self less favorably than did those who were persuaded to feel distant from

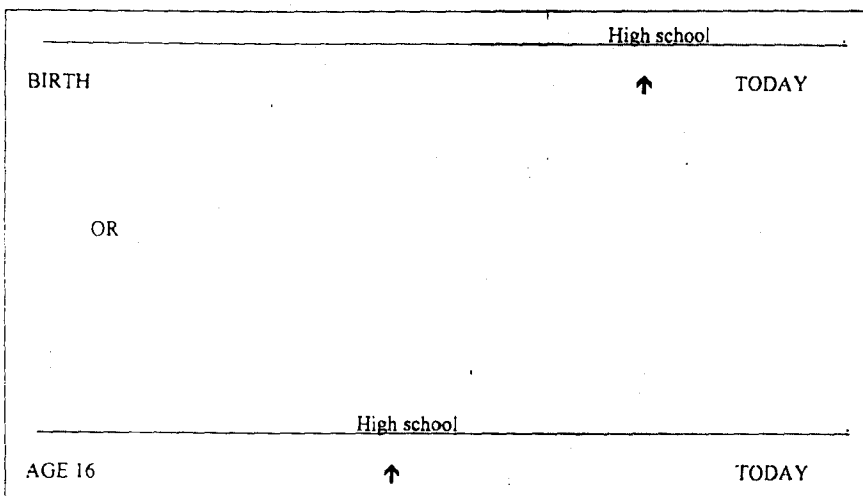


Fig. 1. Time-line manipulation of spatial distance. The birth-to-today time line makes high school seem subjectively more recent than does the age-16-to-today time line.

the very same failures. Similarly, participants who felt close to earlier successes evaluated their current self more favorably than did those who were led to regard the same accomplishments as more remote. The identical event has a different impact depending on whether people remember it as near or far away in time.

CONCLUSIONS

Our research suggests that people's views of their personal histories are remarkably dependent on feelings of subjective temporal distance. They praise or criticize the same former self, depending on how distant it feels. An equally distant event feels close or remote, depending on whether it has favorable or damaging implications for evaluations of the current self. The identical achievement boosts evaluations of the current self or has little impact, depending on how far away it feels. The same failure does or does not harm appraisals of the current self, depending on how far away it feels.

In everyday life, people are unlikely to come across time lines, but they do encounter events that can affect the subjective distance of past selves and episodes. Transitions such as marriage or changing religions, jobs, cities, or romantic partners might cause the pretransition self to seem remote. Even physical or material changes (e.g., getting a new haircut or car) might represent transitions to some individuals and serve to distance earlier selves. Personal experiences can also cause the past to feel close rather than distant. Visiting the neighborhood where one lived as a child or attending a school reunion may pull ancient history back into the subjective present.

In the future, we intend to extend our research in several directions. We will study people in late adulthood to examine how they protect their current self in the face of age-related declines in important attributes. We will also study whether subjective temporal distance plays an important role in judgments of other people and, perhaps more interesting, of historical events. Over time, all societies are forced to consider what aspects of historical experience are best forgotten, as well as what episodes should be preserved and carried forward into the future. We will examine whether the principles governing individual memory also help explain when societies distance and memorialize historical events.

Recommended Reading

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Note

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Critical Thinking Questions

1. Psychologists have long known that memories shape our self-concept. How does this article suggest the reverse proposition, that the self-concept shapes our memories?
2. What is temporal self-appraisal theory and what does it predict about people's view of their past selves?
3. Under what conditions, and why, might people recall their past selves in less-than-glowing terms?

Citizens' Sense of Justice and the Legal System

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Abstract

When an actor commits a wrong action, citizens have perceptions of the kind of responsibility the actor incurs, the degree to which the act was mitigated or justified, and the appropriate punishment for the actor. The legislatively mandated law of criminal courts, statutes, and criminal codes deals with the same issues. Experimental evidence shows that there are important discrepancies between the principles that people and legal codes use to assign responsibility. That is, the moral retributive-justice principles that people use are sometimes in conflict with the directions in which modern code drafters are taking criminal law. These discrepancies may cause citizens to feel alienated from authority, and to reduce their voluntary compliance with legal codes.

Keywords

justice; morality; criminal responsibility; legal decisions

There are many contributions that psychology can make to the criminal justice system. For instance, psychological studies and theories are relevant to the distortions that can affect eyewitness testimony, or whether an individual is competent to stand trial. Other possible contributions are more controversial, in that they might require some considerable rethinking of significant aspects of the legal system. One such area centers around citizens' perceptions of justice, and the relation between those notions of justice and the rules of justice written into the various legal codes.

Why should we care about "commonsense justice?"² The reason is that if a legal system's rules for assigning blame and punishment diverge in important ways from the principles that the citizens believe in, then those citizens may lose respect for the legal system. They may continue to obey the rules that the "justice" system imposes, but will do so largely to avoid punishment. No society can continue to exist if its citizens take that attitude toward its legal system.

Does the system of justice in the United States have this problem? Are there important discrepancies between the laws and the citizens' sense of justice?

MAPPING THE CONTOURS OF THE CITIZENS' SENSE OF JUSTICE

A number of investigations have elucidated the outlines of U.S. citizens' sense of just procedures. A landmark series of studies (Thibaut & Walker, 1975) demonstrated Americans' preference for procedures that give all participants repeated opportunities to express "their side" of the case, rather than more court-guided inquisitorial procedures. Continuing this tradition, Tyler (1990) studied persons who had gone through court proceedings. If they felt the proceedings