

Autobiographical Memory and Its Relationship with Grief

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Abstract

Autobiographical Memory and Its Relationship with Grief are popular topics in psychological research. The existing studies linking the two areas are mainly focused on the following four aspects: Content, Characteristics and functions of autobiographical memory of griever; Cognitive and emotional impact mechanism of the grieving process on autobiographical memory; Autobiographical memory as an intervention in the grieving process; Role of culture in the relationship between Autobiographical Memory and Its Relationship with Grief, such as the familism culture in China. Future research should focus on 1) clarifying the content of the autobiographical memory of grievers while extending our understanding from the aspect of the specificity of such memory to its more general properties and advancing empirical knowledge of its functioning, 2) the mechanism of self-concept and emotions on the autobiographical memory of grievers, 3) intervention and autobiographical memory in grievers and 4) the influence of culture.

Keywords:

Autobiographical memory, grief, impact mechanism, intervention, culture

Introduction

Early memory researchers often studied simple, meaningless memory content. When researchers studied memory using more natural, complex and personally meaningful content, did related research fields turn in directions with more ecological validity. An example of research with more ecological validity, autobiographical memory that contains individual personal experiences became a popular topic in memory research, reaching a peak in the 1990s (Conway, Bruce, & Sehulster, 1998) and remaining popular today. Compared with “dead” materials, such as the nonsense syllables of traditional research, autobiographical memory is “living” memory with an important effect on the behavior of individuals.

Among the events that an individual experiences in a lifetime, loss events have a substantial impact. Particularly in cultures that emphasize family ties, major losses are considered virtually unbearable. In Chinese culture, “loss of father/mother at an early age, being widowed in middle-age, and loss of son/daughter in old age” are considered the three greatest tragedies of life. Here, “loss” refers to the loss of loved ones or objects to which one is attached. After such a loss, an individual will undergo a grieving process. Grief is an inherent physiological and psychological response that occurs when an individual faces loss. For those who suffer loss, grief is a necessity. The grieving process is one of repairing and preventing trauma (Sverre, 2003).

Recent studies have demonstrated that during the grieving process following a loss, particularly in the development and maintenance of adaptive signs, autobiographical memory plays an important role (Maccallum & Bryant, 2013). After a loss event, maladaptive individuals may undergo systemic changes in their autobiographical memory (e.g., impairment in retrieving specific autobiographical memories) (Maccallum & Bryant, 2010a, 2010b). This phenomenon suggests that changes in autobiographical memory are a consequence of the grieving process and an indicator that can be used to assess this process. Therefore, the study linking Autobiographical Memory and Its Relationship with Grief has important theoretical significance and utility value. This paper systemically examines the literature on the relationship between Autobiographical Memory and Its Relationship with Grief to provide ideas for future studies. Prior to this, this paper will give a brief introduction to the definition, function and measurement of autobiographical memory.

A brief instruction of Autobiographical Memory

Definition of Autobiographical Memory

Scholars define autobiographical memory differently. Tulving (1983) equates autobiographical memory with episodic memory, considering it to be context-dependent, to have a space-time background and to be closely linked with self-experience. Conway (1996) considers autobiographical memory to be a core component of the self-memory system and that it is the memory of personal information or personally experienced life events, including multiple mental processes, such as sensory experiences, episodic memory, semantic memory and self-representation. Yang (2012) believes that autobiographical memory is a process that stores and retrieves information associated with self-experience that spontaneously arises from daily life. Based on the different definitions by previous scholars, we define autobiographical memory as the individual memories of their experience, including the whole life, certain stages of life and some concrete events at specific occasions.

Function of Autobiographical Memory

It is generally considered that autobiographical memory possesses a self function, a social function and a directive function (Bluck & Alea, 2002). Theoretical and empirical studies support this division into three functions (Bluck & Alea, 2011; Bluck, Alea, Habermas, & Rubin, 2005). The self function refers to the creation of a stable, lasting self-representation, which helps an individual express and understand him- or herself through memory and complete his or her identity construction such that the individual knows “who he/she is” (Conway, 2005). The social function refers to the exchange of ideas, feelings and needs and the expression of sympathy and understanding

through sharing autobiographical memory to establish intimacy and social links (Bluck & Alea, 2002; Alea & Bluck, 2007). The directive function refers to understanding and solving current problems or guiding future actions and goals through reflection on memories of events (Bluck et al., 2005).

Measurement of Autobiographical Memory

Measuring content of autobiographical memory

The measurement of the content of autobiographical memory is primarily performed through interviews. A number of studies have used open-ended questions (Wang, 2004; Han, Leichtman, & Wang, 1998). However, more frequently, clues are used to induce autobiographical memory in the subject. Although clue techniques that measure autobiographical memory are often used to assess the specificity of autobiographical memory, clue techniques are a type of interview that is well suited for measuring the content of autobiographical memory and have been applied (Yang, 2016). To measure the degree of specificity of autobiographical memory, Williams and Broadbent (1986) created a clue-word interview technique termed the Autobiographical Memory Test (AMT). The technique uses ten clue words (five positive and five negative) to induce autobiographical memory in the subject. The AMT procedure is to first inform the test subject what a specific autobiographical memory is and to ensure his or her understanding through practice. Then, the subject is presented ten words in a specific order. The subject is required to report a specific autobiographical memory within a specified time interval.

Measuring characteristics of autobiographical memory

Specificity is the most remarkable feature of autobiographical memory and primarily measured using a clue technique. However, autobiographical memory has numerous other features, which are primarily measured with questionnaires, such as the Memory Experiences Questionnaire (MEQ) (Sutin & Robins, 2007) and the Autobiographical Memory Characteristics Questionnaire (AMCQ) (Boyacioglu & Akfirat, 2014). MEQ can measure ten aspects of autobiographical memory, including vividness, coherence, accessibility, et al. AMCQ can measure as many as 17 aspects, including vividness, belief in accuracy, time details, et al.

Measuring Functions of Autobiographical Memory

Bluck et al. developed Thinking About Life Experiences (TALE). As the tool's acronym suggests, TALE involves stories or narratives, which reflects the character of autobiographical memory. TALE includes 28 questions and can be used to assess the self, social and directive functions of autobiographical memory (Bluck et al., 2005). Later, for the convenience of testing, Bluck and Alea (2011) simplified the TALE to 15 questions. Instead of assessing the various functions of autobiographical memory using a single questionnaire, a number of researchers use different questionnaires to assess different functions (Waters, 2014).

Content, Characteristics and Functions of the Autobiographical Memory of Grievors

Content of autobiographical memory of grievors

Certain grief theories refer generally to the content of the autobiographical memory of grievors. For example, according to Marrone's grieving phases, the first phase of grief is "cognitive restructuring", i.e., the cognitive integration of the passing of the deceased (Marrone, 1999). This integration process must involve autobiographical memory. The Attachment and Dual-Process Model of bereavement is a more comprehensive theory of grief that integrates theories of attachment, trauma, and cognitive coping. It divides the daily experience of the grieving process into loss-oriented and restration-oriented components, whereby "loss-oriented" refers to assessing the loss and relocating the deceased in one's cognition (Stroebe, Schut, & Stroebe, 2005). The assessment of the loss and relocation of the deceased are directly related to autobiographical memory.

A number of qualitative studies on the grief response note the content of the autobiographical memory of grievors, e.g., intrusive thoughts (Tang & Jia, 2013), rumination (He, Tang, Zhu, & Wang, 2014), strong longing and calling out (Xu, Chen, Zhang, & Zhang, 2011). There is also a quantitative study finding a significant correlation between prolonged grief symptoms and positive intrusive memories of the lost person (Boelen & Huntjens, 2008). However, none of the above studies has described the contents of autobiographical memory specifically. Yang (2016) used the AMT to summarize the autobiographical memory content of parents who lost their only child and found that the content could be divided into eight categories: grief events related to the death of the child, life-threatening events, anticipated future events,

Characteristics of autobiographical memory of grievers

Research mainly examined the relationship between prolonged grief and the specificity of autobiographical memory. "Prolonged grief disorder is a disturbance in which, following the death of a partner, parent, child, or other person close to the bereaved, there is persistent and pervasive grief response characterized by longing for the deceased or persistent preoccupation with the deceased accompanied by intense emotional pain (World Health Organization, 2018)." A survey of 301 bereaved Chinese found that 5.01% presented prolonged grief disorder (He, Wang, Wei, Xie, & Tang, 2013). "Specific autobiographical memory" refers to a memory of an event at a specific time and place that an individual can recall and whose duration does not exceed one day. Many studies have consistently found that prolonged grief is related to a decrease in specific autobiographical memories but that the autobiographical memory associated with the loss event has "immunity" and its specificity will not diminish (MacCallum & Bryant, 2010a).

Functions of autobiographical memory of grievers

Many grief theories note the role of autobiographical memory in the grieving process. The Grief Work Hypothesis proposes that grievers experience a process of facing loss, recalling events from before and after the death of the deceased and gradually psychologically separating from the deceased. The emotions of the living fluctuate and drift as they relive each memory associated with the deceased and continually realize that the deceased no longer exists (Stroebe & Schut, 2013). Sverre (2003) proposed that the grieving process always includes remembering the object, investing in memories, immersing in imagination and memory as well as organizing and understanding. Worden's task theory of mourning proposed that the griever must complete four tasks: to experience the pains of grieving, to accept the reality of the loss,

to adapt to a new life and to emotionally relocate the deceased (Worden, 2009). Among the tasks, acceptance of the reality of the loss and relocation of the deceased clearly involve autobiographical memory. The Dual-Process Model of bereavement of Stroebe and Schut proposes that the manner in which loss is addressed can be divided into loss-oriented and restoration-oriented components. The former includes missing the deceased, severing or maintaining the connection with the deceased and rumination over the bereavement event, while the latter is focused on changes in life (Stroebe & Schut, 2010). Scholars who have summarized grief theories consistently note that sharing autobiographical memory related to loss, particularly among family members, is the primary way for grievers to maintain and/or restore a healthy self-identity (Baddeley & Singer, 2010). Although the mentioned grief theories do not systemically discuss the function of autobiographical memory in the grieving process, they individually mention the appearance during grieving of its self function (e.g., restoring self-identity), its social function (e.g., sharing with others) and its directive function (e.g., adapting to new life).

Cognitive and Emotional Impact Mechanism of the Grieving Process on Autobiographical Memory

The Chinese psychologists Chen and Zhong (2006) consider that the psychological aspect of grief includes cognition and emotion. Regarding the cognitive aspect, traumatic events may shake or challenge an individual's core beliefs. Whether these beliefs can be restored largely depends on whether the bereaved can integrate the traumatic event into his or her original belief (Liu & Li, 2007). One core cognitive characteristic of those suffering from prolonged grief disorders is the inadequate integration of the experience of loss into their autobiographical "database" (Boelen, van den Hout, & van den Bout, 2006). That is, they

cannot accept the fact of the deceased's death (Lichtenthal, Cruess, & Prigerson, 2004). Neimeyer (2016) pointed out that the core of the grieving process was the griever tried to reaffirm or reconstruct his/her loss-disturbed view towards the world; namely how the griever integrated the loss into the self-narrative. There is also a study finding that prolonged grief symptoms are associated with autobiographical memories that are linked to self-identity, and those grievous people who have experienced yearnings would think that their self-identity is more closely connected with the deceased (Maccallum & Bryant, 2008). One idea suggested by the preceding discussion is that integrating the loss event into the existing self-concept may be an important cognitive development mechanism during the grieving process. "Self-concept" refers to the overall understanding and evaluation of self by an individual, and self-concept and autobiographical memory together constitute self-knowledge, respectively representing current self-knowledge and past self-information. Self-concept has a selecting and activating effect on autobiographical memory (Wang, 2006). Conversely, autobiographical memory also affects an individual's self-concept (Charlesworth, Allen, Havelka, & Moulin, 2016).

Regarding the emotional aspect, the Grief Work Hypothesis postulates that the bereaved invests his or her emotions to relive every memory associated with the deceased until the grieving process comes to an end (Freud, 1984). The hypothesis of emotion regulation of post-traumatic autobiographical memory also considers that the reduction of the specificity of post-traumatic autobiographical memory is an emotion regulation strategy to prevent recalling painful details (Sumner, 2011). Many empirical studies have investigated the relationship between autobiographical memory and emotion and found, to name three examples, that a positive autobiographical memory can reduce negative emotions (Josephson, Singer, & Salovey, 1996), that the extraction of autobiographical memory through emotional clue words is significantly faster than through

non-emotional clue words (Huang, Li, & Wu, 2007) and that recalling autobiographical stories can increase the sense of warmth felt by test subjects (Alea & Bluck, 2007). These studies consistently show that emotions and autobiographical memory play important roles in one another's formation and maintenance.

Given the central importance of self-concept and emotions to autobiographical memory, a number of studies have examined how the two work together to influence autobiographical memory. Yeung et al. found that negative emotions simultaneously form a negative self-concept and generalized autobiographical memory (Yeung, Dalgleish, Golden, & Schartau, 2006). An (2009) found that individuals with a positive self-concept tend to produce generalized memories of negative experiences, while those with negative self-concepts tend to produce generalized memories of positive experiences. Few studies have examined the combined effect of self-concept and emotions on autobiographical memory. However, the existing studies suggest that mutual influences occur among self-concept, emotions and autobiographical memory.

Certain variables may have a moderating effect on the cognitive and emotional impact of the grieving process on autobiographical memory. For example, the grief ritual may play a role in both the cognitive and the emotional realm. Through grief ritual, the griever expresses an integrated sense of emotions, thoughts, and (or) spiritual beliefs about the departed souls in a symbolic way (Castle & Phillips, 2003), not only achieving effective expression of many otherwise indescribable emotions but also changing cognition through emotional expressions and behaviors (Jia, 2010). The attachment types primarily play a role in the emotional process. Field states that adult attachment relationships can enhance one's ability to regulate emotions when facing stressful scenarios (Field & Gao, 2005).

Individuals with different attachment types cope with grief differently (Stroebe et al., 2005), and individuals with insecure attachment cannot adequately cope with the emotions occasioned by loss, resulting in social dysfunction (Shear & Shair, 2005).

Autobiographical memory as an intervention in the grieving process

Psychological treatment is often aimed to intervene in the problematic self-narrative of the griever, through the innovative moments, individuals integrate their life experiences into a coherent story (Piazzabonin, Neimeyer, Alves, Smigelsky, & Crunk, 2016; Piazzabonin, Neimeyer, Alves, & Smigelsky, 2016). Westerhof et al. developed an intervention method for individuals experiencing significant life events. According to the severity, the intervention method is divided into three levels: reminiscence interventions, life-review interventions and life-review therapy. Reminiscence interventions are primarily applied to the social function of autobiographical memory, while the other two levels are primarily applied to the self function (Westerhof & Bohlmeijer, 2014).

Mindfulness is a popular intervention method developed in recent years that primarily involves intentionally focusing attention on the here and now, suspending judgment and focusing on every moment of an experience (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Empirical studies have shown that mindfulness training may enhance the specificity of autobiographical memory (Hargus, Crane, Barnhofer, & Williams, 2010). If narrative therapy is directed at autobiographical memory, the intervention effect of mindfulness may occur indirectly through the integration of self-concept and mood improvement. On the one hand, mindfulness can not only change self-reported explicit self-concept but also affect implicit self-concept on a deeper level and improve the coordination between the two so

as to form a more solid and positive integrated self-concept (Crescentini & Capurso, 2015). On the other hand, mindfulness has been shown to ameliorate negative emotions (Xu, Wang, & Liu, 2015).

In addition to narrative therapy and mindfulness training, researchers have investigated Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) (Spinhoven, Does, van Dyck, & Kremers, 2006), MEmory Specificity Training (MEST) (Raes, Williams, & Hermans, 2009) and other intervention methods and achieved certain effectiveness in alleviating depression by improving the specificity of the subject's autobiographical memory. There has also been a study demonstrating that CBT can enhance the degree of specificity of autobiographical memory of patients with complicated grief (Maccallum & Bryant, 2011).

Role of Culture in the Relationship between Autobiographical Memory and Its Relationship with Grief

Individuals from different cultural backgrounds exhibit differences in content, structure, valence, accessibility, developmental origin, and functional usage of autobiographical memory (Wang, 2016). In autobiographical memory research, although a number of studies have targeted test subjects from China, Japan and other Eastern countries, the vast majority of subjects have been Western, educated individuals from industrialized, rich and democratic countries (WEIRD). Alea and Wang have recommended that autobiographical memory research "go global" (Alea & Wang, 2015). Similarly, the grieving process has strong cultural characteristics, it is not suitable to "export" the grief model, a product of the US, to other cultures (Neimeyer, 2012).

The role of culture in the relationship between Autobiographical Memory and Its Relationship with Grief primarily involves how culture influences the function of autobiographical memory in the

grieving process. No study specifically focuses on this question. However, we can infer from studies on ordinary individuals that cultural characteristics may be exhibited by the autobiographical memory of grievers. Regarding self function, studies have found that test subjects from Taiwan and Japan used autobiographical memory to maintain self-continuity more than those from the US (Liao, Bluck, Alea, & Cheng, 2015) possibly because in the collectivist cultural context of the East, self-continuity is susceptible to interference from others and therefore has a greater need for autobiographical memory to play its self-stabilizing role. Thus, in the course of grieving, the bereaved in Eastern cultures relies more on the self function of autobiographical memory. Regarding the social function, the study found that Japanese university students used autobiographical memory to maintain social bonding more than their American counterparts (Maki, Kawasaki, Demiray, & Janssen, 2015). On this basis, it was inferred that the bereaved in Eastern cultures may require relatively more social support. Regarding the directive function, the study found that Asian Americans used the directive function more than European Americans did possibly because members of Eastern cultures focus on lessons learned while those from Western cultures place more emphasis on forward thinking (Wang, Koh, Song, & Hou, 2014). Based on this result, it may be inferred that the bereaved in Eastern cultures may be more inclined to summarize the experience of and lessons learned from the loss event. Regarding the emotion regulation function, individuals from Eastern cultures tend to use avoidance strategies (Tweed, White, & Lehman, 2004), for example, pretending that the loss event did not occur by providing a bowl and chopsticks for the deceased at meals.

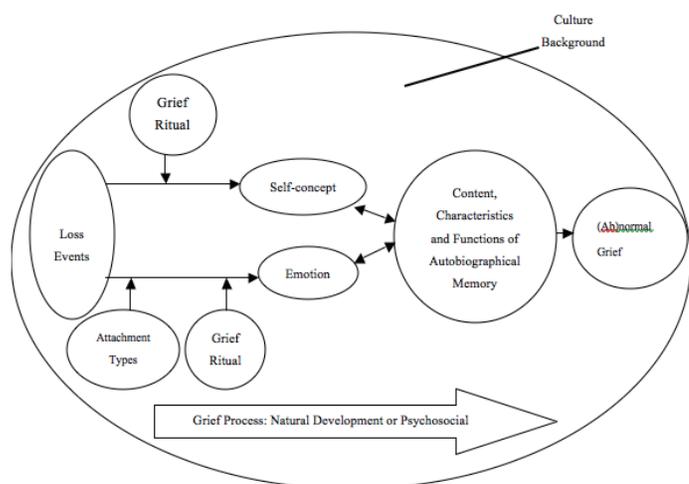
A small number of scholars have studied differences in the characteristics of autobiographical memory between test subjects from the East and the West. For

example, one study has shown that children from the East and the West had no significant difference in memory capacity. However, there were differences in specificity. Whether in early memory or recent memory, American adults and children exhibited higher average memory specificity scores than Asian participants, and these discrepancies increased with age (Wang & Conway, 2004). A China-Switzerland cross-culture study of bereaved parents also found that the degree of specificity of autobiographical memory of Swiss bereaved parents was significantly higher than that of Chinese bereaved parents (Xiu, Maercker, Yang, & Jia, 2017).

The content of autobiographical memory will inevitably be influenced by culture. To cite the example of religious and cultural background, Christians may experience "Complicated Spiritual Grief" after loss. It means that the griever, whose previous belief has been eroded or even collapses, keeps reflecting on the significance of religious activities they once engaged in (Neimeyer, 2016). In addition to the strong influence of religion, other secular cultures will no doubt exert influence on the content of the autobiographical memory. For example, the familism culture is an important secular culture that affects Chinese society. Under the influence of this culture, the connection between Chinese people and their families is usually closer than that of the Westerners, and the content of the memory of bereaved group is likely to be affected by this close connection. There were studies using word-cluing technology to trigger the autobiographical memory of Chinese parents having lost their only child, and then carried out meaning coding, finding that up to 42.9% of the code units were in relation to the dead child. These memories often show fairly obvious cultural characteristics, such as the despair of dying without descendants, or the sense of loss of getting old without anyone to rely on (Yang, 2016).

Future Directions: A Framework for Guiding Research

Fig. 1 The model of relationship between Autobiographical Memory and Its Relation-



As shown in Fig. 1, future research should focus on the following issues.

First, studies should focus on the content, characteristics and functions of the autobiographical memory of grievers. Only limited research has been conducted on the content of the autobiographical memory of grievers. Researchers lack a detailed understanding of this phenomenon, and research should be strengthened in this area in the future. To this end, clue techniques may be improved to make them more suitable for measuring the content of autobiographical memory. In addition, research on the characteristics of the autobiographical memories of grievers focuses nearly exclusively on the specificity of such memories, and the subjects have primarily been individuals suffering from prolonged grief. Future studies should widely apply the tools used to measure multiple characteristics of autobiographical memory to grief research and expand the subject types to include non-clinical subjects. Again, discussions of the functions of the autobiographical memory of grievers largely remain at the theoretical level. Future studies should pay increased attention to empirical

Second, previous studies have arrived at consistent conclusions on the relationship between self-concept and autobiographical memory and that between emotion and autobiographical memory. On the one hand, future research should more comprehensively investigate the relationship among the three phenomena. On the other hand, systematic investigation is required to determine which psychological variables moderate the development of self-concept and emotion after the loss event, whether variables proposed based on theory (e.g., grief rituals and attachment type) have a significant moderating effect and what other possible moderators exist.

Third, in terms of intervention, a variety of interventions (e.g., narrative therapy, mindfulness training, CBT) have been shown to enhance the specificity of autobiographical memory. However, not so many studies have used grievers as subjects. Therefore, the effect of these interventions on the grief process has not been well described. Future studies should conduct more intervention studies on grievers. In addition, studies in the future can compare the differences in the effectiveness of different therapies in enhancing the specificity of the autobiographical memory of the grieving people.

Fourth, culture has an important influence on grief and autobiographical memory. between the two should be studied in the context of different cultures, especially those related to grief. Many recent research findings are based on subjects from a limited cultural background. In the future, the relationship For example, the Chinese familism culture touches on the connections between many grievers and the dead, especially the way grief rituals are performed. Do these cultural behaviors affect the autobiographical memories of the grievers? How do they affect the grievers? Clarifying these issues facilitates developing intervention plans based on autobiographical memory and native culture, which help grievers tide over their course of grief.

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