

Making Time for Family: Schemas for Long-Term Family Memory

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1 Introduction

Accurate and detailed accounts of what people are doing when where and for how long tell us a great deal about their lives. But the question of how we *use* our time is quite different from the issue of how we *experience* our time. Anthropological research on time has shown that people's experience of time is dependent upon the cultural models of time available to them (Evans-Pritchard 1969; Geerts 1973; Gell 1992; Shore 1996). The experience of time is also always retrospective, dependant upon how people recall their activities. In order to affect recall, cultural models of time must also become cognitive models (Cole 2004).

Our project goal at the MARIAL Center at Emory University is to understand how family members develop a sense of common identity through shared memory schemas that helped define a distinctive kind of autobiographical memory that we call "family memory" (Kendall-Taylor and Shore 2002; Fivush in press; Fivush et al. in press; Shore 2008; Shore 2005). "Family memory" lies at the intersection of shared activities and memory and the conversations and narratives through which these activities and objects become transformed into durable shared memory schemas. While such long-term family memory is presumably grounded in a wide range of shared activities, it turns out to be highly selective, and depending on structures of cognitive salience that are negotiated in the course of family conversations (Bartlett 1932; Fitzgerald 1988; Fivush in press b).

This particular research project is based upon numerous family conversations with four middle-class working families in a small town in north central Georgia. These conversations were recorded approximately every two weeks over a period of two years. During these conversations families recounted and debated the typical organization of family activities during the year, the season, and the day. Families were allowed to establish their

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own landmarks for these periods of time in order to ascertain the ways that families anchor their sense of ritual and routine. In addition to these recorded conversations, I attended numerous family events with each of the families, including family meals, family celebrations, sports activities, and even a day at a local high school, “shadowing” one of the students.

While this methodology targets a very small sample of families, the data generated is extensive and quite detailed. This kind of qualitative research allow us to formulate some interesting hypotheses about how this particular set of families constructs models of family history over time. Further comparative research will be necessary to understand how general these findings are for other American families.

While I learned a lot about how these families in a small Southern town actually spend their time together, I was also equally interested in how they came to conceive of their time together as shared family memories. In this sense my concern was less the objective structure of what families did together than the processes by which families negotiated and constructed a set of memory schemas to ensure a stable sense of family identity through joint activities.

In studying the co-construction by family members of a set of joint memories for family activities, we are studying the micro evolution of a distinctive “family culture.” In this usage, “culture” means a complex social system of shared memories some of which are held jointly and others which are distinctively socially distributed. Families become and remain distinctive entities through the production and inheritance of joint property. While we commonly think of such family property in terms of material artifacts and objects, it is equally true that family continuity depends upon the construction and transmission of joint memory structures. And thus family culture is, to a great extent, dependent upon the successful production of such family memory schemas. A family unit can be conceived of as a micro-society with a distinctive set of traditions that it creates, transforms, and transmits over time and between generations.

While autobiographical memory is commonly studied by psychologists as a feature of individual memory, anthropologists are more interested in how memories become shared within communities and serve as resources for collective identity (Battaglia 1990; Feeley-Harnik 1991). In this research, we understand family memory as a kind of joint autobiographical memory that affects the individual memories of each of the family members.

In recording and closely analyzing the family conversations we can witness the origins and the transformations of memory schemas many of which will come to underwrite the family’s sense of its collective life together. It is important to note that when individuals are asked to recall significant family memories from their past, their narratives tend to alternate between two distinctive kinds of autobiographical memories: The first kind are the memories of unique events which act as landmarks in constructing a sense of past life, that highly emotionally salient events such as births, deaths, illnesses and the like. These events are recounted in what might be termed “historical time” and often include a fair amount of detail.

Particularly salient events like the death of a loved one, or the assassination of President Kennedy often are remembered with the apparent vividness of what psychologists call “flashbulb memories” (Conway 1995; Winograd and Neisser 1992). Such landmark events are generally recounted in the past tense, as direct narratives of unique events. Exhibit 1 provides an example of a family recounting their hearing about the 9/11 attacks:

The second kind of memory that families invoke when talking about their past deals less with particular events than with typical routines. Rather than framed in historical time

these “routine” memories are framed in what we might call “ritual time.” They are often narrated in the format “*we used to...*” or “when we were kids *we always...*”

Exhibit 1—Examples of Event Memory

F. Joe called and said that I had a meeting. And then about the time he, that... I was trying to get everything up so I could go to the meeting, then Roy was there. Somebody called Roy, and told him that a plane had hit the World Trade Center. And of course if they hadn't said “World Trade Center in New York” I wouldn't even know where it was to be honest with you. I didn't know there were two twin towers up there.

B. Oh really.

F. No.

M. He doesn't go to New York.

F. Well I didn't know where it was. It didn't mean anything to me because they said World Trade Center in New York. I didn't have any idea, I had to have a minute to visualize these two twin towers, I didn't know what it was. I didn't know it was two twin towers. So then I left, and turned on the radio. As soon as I got in the car I turned on the radio, because it said they thought it was some kind of terrorist thing. So then I turned on the radio, and then while I was driving from my office over to Pete Gertner's office, which is in town, the second hit. When I walked into his office they were having a big meeting, and I said, you all know the terrorists had flown planes into the World Trade Center? They said yeah, we knew one of them was hit, I said no, it was 2 of them. And while we were there his secretary came in, this was about 9:30 or 9:40 or whatever it was, she said one had hit the Pentagon. Well no, she said there's a news report that the Pentagon's on fire. And I thought, the Pentagon's on fire? And then we found out it was a plane had flown into the Pentagon, so we just...the meeting that were in his... the guy that owns the dirt, the 27 million cubic yards of dirt to build the 5th runway at Hartsfield, that guy, that's who we were meeting with because we've been helping him get the environmental permits. And we're sitting there talking about building the 5th runway at Hartsfield, and that's what the meeting is. And all this stuff is happening with airlines, so we just stopped the meeting, and drove across the....

(In this and the following transcriptions of family conversations **B** stands for me, the interviewer, **M** for mother, **F** for father, **S** and **D** for son and daughter, with multiple sons or daughters represented by **S1**, **S2** and **D1**, **D2**. All personal and place names have been changed to protect anonymity)

The other kind of memory that families invoke deals less with particular events than with typical routines. Rather than framed in historical time, these “routine” memories are framed in “ritual time,” narrated in formats like, “*we used to...*” or “when we were kids *we always...*” Such “routine” memories are often based on particularly salient instances of repeated activities, a kind of generalized memory structure that is the cognitive equivalent of what we call “institutions.” The following interview excerpt illustrates a narrative framed in “ritual time” which tends to employ the simple present tense, sometimes modified by adverbs like “usually” or “always.”

Exhibit 2—Examples of Generalized Routine Memories

B. What **do you guys do** on July 4th?

F. Fireworks.

M. The lake is a big thing too. **We usually** go with Bob and Geraldine and hang out there.

S. **We went this year** to the lake.

D. **We've done that every year** haven't we?

F. **We just did that one time. Usually we go** with our friends and eat and then go to the Fairview fire works.

B. What **do you do** on Halloween?

D. Candy.

Exhibit 2—continued

S. Halloween is awesome. **We go** trick or treating. Selby Street is phenomenal.

B. So **you go** into Fairview and trick or treat?

M. **We do**. The neighborhoods that we have lived in have not been great for trick or treating. **We tend to go** get with other families who also don't have neighborhoods, like we have several friends that just live on land like acreage and aren't neighborhoods. And **they usually invite** those of us who don't live in neighborhoods to come and join them so we've gone like to the Smith's neighborhood. **This year** the Jones. **Last year** on Selby Street.

F. You can't trick-or-treat here. The kids can't walk.

S. Selby Street was pretty fun. **We did that the year before** with some other friends. **That's what we've done every year** has been with groups of friends. **I've always been** something scary and **this year I was** a girl.

D. We are usually in Nashville on New Year's Eve and come back on New Year's Day. The next day school starts. I pretty much hate January because it is my least favorite month. January is so boring.

S. Except for the second from the last day, which is your birthday.

D. The second from the last day is my birthday. I was born January 30th. But, that whole month is just cold and dreary with schoolwork.

M. We have to put up all the decorations.

D. All the decorations go up. You are bored with winter.

S. Unless it is a snow day.

M. We watch football on January 1st on New Year's Day.

F. No, I listen to football while I am driving because I don't get to stay and watch the ball games because we got to get home.

M. Well, this year we had ball games on at our house on New Year's Day. Interestingly enough, we proceed and do the same thing every January 1st.

Autobiographical memory, then, comprises two distinct kinds of memory: Event Memories and Generalized Routine Memories. Event Memories may be further classified in terms of the scale of the time frame which they encapsulate (Conway 1992). Memories for Specific Events would include "my first date," or "the day we moved to Philadelphia."

By contrast, Extended Events comprise longer sequences of time that are still considered as discrete events in a lifetime, like "my freshman year at college," or "the Christmas holidays of 1982." More general and extensive still are Epochal Memories which encode whole periods or chapters of a life, as in "my adolescent years," or "when we lived in Ridgefield, Connecticut." The framework described above for autobiographical memory is represented schematically in Fig. 1.

Obviously, these different kinds of event memory represent relative differences in the generality of the memory frame, rather than a discrete typology. It is common for these narratives to be punctuated by specific event memories so that the framing of the narrative contains frequent alternations between past and present tenses. Memories for specific events appear to have an important role in generating longer frames of memory, from specific event memories.

Epochal Memories are often generalized from salient specific events that "stand in for" a more general situation. In the same way, Generalized Routine Memories tend to typify specific salient events, as in the following quote framed linguistically as generalized routine memory. Note especially the effect of the verb forms in generalizing what appear to be more specific memories.

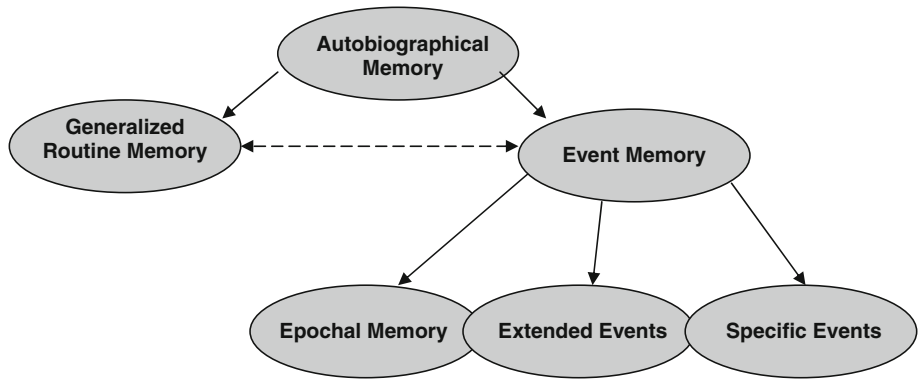


Fig. 1 The structure of autobiographical memory

When growing up **we always had** – I grew up Methodist in a little church here in the community and **we always had** a sunrise service where everybody **would get up and gather** at somebody's house and typically they would do it, we had a lot of dairy farmers around here so somebody would erect a wooden cross out on the side the lake or something and then they would have a little service there, maybe a 30 minute service. **Sing some songs and read a little scripture** and read about the resurrection and then, and **then have coffee** and doughnuts or something.

Consider how different this passage would read if it had been related in the past tense. Often the tenses change or alternate, suggesting an ongoing negotiation of whether an event will be taken as typical or specific. The following examples are typical:

The fact that these memory schemas are, to a great extent, negotiable in the very process of narration is highlighted by the following exchange where the family tries to characterize what they do on Mother's Day and Father's Day.

S. And **we fix**, yeah **we usually** cook out.

M. No, **we cook** pancakes.

S. Oh we do in that morning.

M. **We cook pancakes all the time.**

B. And is Dad allowed to sleep late on Father's Day or anything like that?

S. Dad doesn't sleep late **in general**.

M. **He never does.**

S. **He has lately some.**

D. No. **We wake up** at 8 o'clock at least.

In these exchanges we witness family members actively negotiating the construction of a family narrative, attempting to sort out those events that are understood to be unique from those rituals more typical of family life. We might think of family autobiography something like a musical score: an orchestration of a distinctive focal melody on the surface and a less salient bass line underneath that holds it all together.

The bass line of family life is its sedimented everyday routines and rituals that underlie a sense of family continuity. By contrast narratives of specific events punctuate the distinctive landmarks that mark the passage of time.

Major landmark events such as births, moves to new communities, graduations and the like shape a family's sense of epochal transitions, and define the shape of a family's emerging sense of itself. Cyclical holidays and celebrations are distinctive in mediating between change and continuity in family life. Many family rituals like Christmas or Thanksgiving are seasonal and recurrent cycles of its life, while birthdays, are also cyclical but mark the family's development, especially landmark birthdays such as the first birthday or the 21st birthday. Such birthdays highlight the nonrecurring dimension of the aging process with both a ritual and unique quality.

M. Now when Peter turned 50, that's a special birthday, so we had a blow-out. You were little.

S2. Three.

M. We had a band, I think we set up a bandstand.

S1. No we had a DJ. In the driveway, we set up, had a DJ.

F. We strung lights all around.

S1. Had two canoes full of beer.

M. Strung lights all through, cooked hotdogs and hamburgers and invited about 300 people.

F. No, about 150.

M. Well 150. Felt like 300.

F. There's pictures right there.

For American middle-class families, moves between communities mark the epochs or chapters of family history as a sequence of houses or neighborhoods.

And Arlene and I have lived in probably 7 or 8 houses, we've made them into homes. We started off in Crandall Corner and everywhere we've lived we've known our neighbors, we've enjoyed our surroundings and some of them haven't been so hot. And I'm sure you and [your wife] are the same. Home is what you make of it.

American middle-class family life is framed by the expectation that residential mobility over the long run will parallel status and economic upward mobility. So family narratives of moves from house to house often have a subtext dealing with class mobility.

We were real blue collar. I grew up in middle class, lived in a little tiny brick house. Mother and Daddy worked hard, they were really, really hard workers. And gave me lots of things and I think the reason they did is because they grew up and didn't have a lot of things. My father would always say he never had a bicycle. He always wanted a wagon. They really were very, very poor. I think we grew up being given lots. Mother made sure I could take dancing lessons and we really had a nice—were raised so differently than they were because they really did not have much growing up.

1.1 The Bedroom

One dramatic transition in the life of children involves their bedrooms and “secret hide-outs” either in the backyard, basement or attic, where kids can gather without their parents. These spaces were important for kids until they could have a room of their own, with a door to shut that told other family members to “keep out.”

Exhibit 3— Memories of a Lost Bedroom

M. And I can remember being in college and thinking about—you know when you first—you know you come home for the weekend and I can remember packing up to go back to school and thinking of going home there. That was my new home. But this will always be home. Through the back part of my mind. The house where my parents live now that we moved to when I was 12, of course it looks nothing—my mother is a redecorator. There is not anything that looks anything like what it did when I grew up there.

B. And what do you mean by saying your mother is a redecorator?

M. I mean when I went to college, when I came home at Christmas all of my stuff was gone and she had painted the room, had new carpet put in and bought furniture.

B. How did you feel?

M. I was furious. I was furious. I got to move into the guest room.

B. You were forced to move into your own guest room?

M. Yeah, because none of my stuff was left. And I had boxes in the attic. Now of course the stuff is all still there.... The curtains were taken down. Everything that I had ever had was packed up and put in the attic. She wanted to clean that mess up.

M. And this is Kevin's room.

B. Did you have the doors closed rule if the door's closed nobody can come in?

S. No, actually I just...I didn't actually do it.

B. Well he's got a nice room to come back to.

M. Well he's gotten angry because I had it painted while he was in college.

B. Oh really?

M. Yeah, because he had the old posters up, and all this kind of thing, and I really cleaned up a lot, but it is his room. These are all his books, and all his things. This is Curious George up there on top.

Exhibit 4—The Eccentric Relative

F. My first cousin Homer Johnson. He lived outside for what three years. And he wasn't homeless. He should have been born in the 1700's. He just kind of missed a generation there. He camped on property that the family owned.

B. Did people try to get him to come indoors?

F. No, we just pretty much said there he is. He would come and stay with us in Atlanta at our house and I remember when we—I was living with two other girls in this old house in Cranford Corners and we had a guy that lived next door to us in the same you know like little house and all. And Homer would come up to stay with us and he couldn't sleep inside. He couldn't stand the air so he was sleeping out back. About 7:00 o'clock in the morning we got a knock on the door and the guy said did you know there is somebody sleeping in the back yard. I said that's okay it's my cousin Homer.

B. Do you know cousin Homer?

D. Oh yeah we love him.

M. Homer is—back in those days he grew a garden. He was self-sufficient.

He might have been homeless but he was self sufficient. He was also a carpenter by trade. And we'd always take him beer you know because he didn't have money or anything. He gardened and he'd sell his vegetables and he'd hunt. But he was the kind with a job and he would be on his way to work and he might see a deer somewhere out and he'd go hunting instead.

B. So how did you guys, the kids, think of him? Did he seem like a crazy person?

S. He's funny. No, he's not crazy he's just Uncle Homer.

Another major transition for these children occurred during their college years, when they returned home to find their bedrooms had been converted to guestrooms.

The neatness and cleanliness of the room for some became a marker that the room was no longer theirs, as in Exhibit 3. Such comments suggest how gaining a private space for a

messy bedroom under one's own control is an important part of growing up in an American middle-class family.

1.2 Other Markers

Other symbolic markers of family identity involve family photos, either framed photographs or contained in photo albums. They represent in pictorial form the historical depth of a family by preserving earlier times.

While the importance of photographs and heirlooms for family identity is not surprising, a less expected shared object of family focus (at least among Southern families) is the "eccentric relative." Interestingly these were never direct lineal relatives, but somebody's "crazy uncle" or eccentric cousin, who provided a distinguishing character to the family portrait, as in Exhibit 4. While maybe no longer living nor known by the children in the family, these individuals are "family relics" in that their stories are passed down to solidify family memory as objects of storytelling.

2 Summary

The above narratives differ greatly from the "objective" accounts of how families spend their time together in time diaries. A family's memory of its time together is not entirely objective, but a creative social process that engages family conversation and storytelling. Producing a family life goes beyond providing material resources to provide a coherent sense of a collective or ritual unit to make sense of themselves as a collectivity over time.

This notion of "family memory" does not mean that every family member shares these memories, as family life will be remembered distinctively by each child. But just as the family has common material resources which shape their family experience, they also produce joint memory objects in the form of family stories to recapture how their lives will be experienced and remembered over time.

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