

Book Review

Rubin, David C. (Ed.) *Autobiographical Memory*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986. 290 pages. Index.

Reviewed by Stephanie Thornton, University of Sussex, Falmer BN1 9QN, England

Autobiographical memory is a topic which, after considerable neglect, surely ought to receive increasing attention. Recall of personal experiences is, as Oscar Wilde has observed, intrinsically interesting as a pastime. An understanding of such recall processes—both dynamically and functionally—might provide insights into the character of cognitive processes of a kind unlikely to derive from more limited experimental tasks. In particular, in putting together models of the functioning of autobiographical memory, it becomes clear that this subject requires an integration of material which is habitually fragmented in psychological research, and much of which is never addressed in other branches of Cognitive Science. What you remember of your own life is tinged by emotions, structured by both individual personality and social convention as well as constrained by the more strictly cognitive processes typically considered in memory research.

Thus, autobiographical memory brings together diverse strands of research in human psychology, strands which are normally fragmented and have no natural meeting place. This ought to be a salutary experience: memory research behaves too often as if the subjects under scrutiny were disembodied cognitive processes devoid of organic motives. Opportunities in this area are raised in many chapters in this book; but they are largely thrown away. There is no real consultation of other strands of research. There is surprisingly little discussion of the juxtaposition of mnemonic and social phenomena. Worst in this respect is the chapter by Brewer, which attempts to provide an account of autobiographical memory in relation to the self through a model breaking down the individual into self-related and self-unrelated components, and the self-related into further functional units. This analysis is put forward without any reference to the extensive relevant literature, and entirely without explanation or justification. It is contentious—for example, is my knowledge of my family history really outside my concept of myself? The utility of the structures put forward by Brewer remains unclear; Brewer does not use them to any great effect in his subsequent argument. But there is some interesting coverage of socio-personal issues in this book, for example in Brown, Shevell, and Rip's chapter on the personal context of public memories. Their results are unsurprising, though their account of these in terms of the interpretation of event memories into social narratives is an interesting contribution.

As a general comment, there is not a lot that is new in this book. It is inevitable—and proper—that experimental work in this area should frequently document the familiar. But detailed experimental justification for conclusions such as “people can recognise events that have occurred in their lives” and “autobiographical memories are not exact” (Barclay, chapter 6) may be going a bit far!

Despite the lack of research in this area, personal memory is so familiar in everyday experience that it is probably unlikely that psychology will discover any radically surprising phenomena. Novelty per se is not the aim. But here lies another problem for this book: it is not at all clear what the targets for research into autobiographical memory actually are. Some of the authors here take autobiographical memory as a topic in its own right, whereas others have used autobiographical memories as data in pursuit of goals integrated with specific issues in the mainstream of memory research.

An example of the latter is the chapter by Baddeley and Wilson, looking at autobiographical memory in brain damaged patients in an attempt to test Tulving's proposition that semantic and episodic memory function as two separate systems. In particular they examine the claim that amnesics show normal semantic but defective episodic memory. Standard experimental measures produce such a result, but such work compares semantic memory based on learning which took place many years ago, and episodic memory measured by new learning. Autobiographical recall provides a measure of episodic memory based on “old” learning, allowing time of learning to be evaluated as a factor. The paper presents some interesting results casting doubt on the generalization that amnesics have normal semantic but defective episodic memory. It also gives an interesting analysis of confabulation in frontal damage, providing process accounts of amnesia in such patients as well as drawing inferences from the results for models of normal memory.

Butters and Cermak's paper is substantially less satisfying. They review material suggesting that the victims of Korsakov's syndrome show temporally graded retrograde amnesia, recalling remote events better than proximate ones. They suggest that this is the result of a two-factor process, whereby there is generalized loss of autobiographical memories from the onset of the acute phase of the disease and also a progressive impoverishment of the ability to learn new material in the period leading up to the onset of acute disease.

When these two effects are superimposed on one another, one would expect a temporally graded deficit in recall. They claim that the most convincing evidence to support this two-factor model comes from a study of an individual, PZ. This patient suffered from severe retrograde amnesia. He was a prominent scientist, who had written an autobiography shortly before succumbing to Korsakov's syndrome. Butters and Cermak demonstrate a temporal gradient in PZ's amnesia, but they present no evidence for poorer

encoding for the more recent events, hence no evidence nor even any relevant analysis in support of the two-factor model.

Two other papers deal with amnesia: The first, by Wetzler and Sweeney, seeks to provide evidence for the existence of the phenomenon of childhood amnesia first highlighted by Freud; namely, the paucity of memories from early childhood. The demonstration depends on the discovery that people report fewer memories from early childhood than we could expect on the basis of a statistical projection of the likely number of memories. The result is intriguing, but vulnerable to criticisms of the projection of expectable memories. The measure seems to beg questions which should certainly be aired—vis-a-vis the nature and basis of memory events, for example—and which, as other authors here show, are not wholly straightforward. There is very little analysis or interpretation of this point, nor of the implications of the result itself. The second of these two chapters, by Crovitz, goes a step further, presenting no analysis or discussion whatsoever—just the protocol of an amnesic trying to recover lost memories. The protocol is interesting, but, in this undigested form, more useful for highlighting the difficulties of interpreting such data than anything else.

The remaining chapters take autobiographical memory as a topic in its own right. Rubin introduces the topic as a new field, emphasizing the need for integration between cognitive, social, and developmental issues in an interesting way, though it would have been nice to have had more discussion of the problems facing such integrative work. Fitzgerald's chapter goes some way towards such a discussion vis-a-vis a developmental perspective on autobiographical memory, though his initial emphasis on "response time" as a key datum in such research (i.e., the interval between presentation of a probe word and the production of a memory report) is a curious choice. Such circumscribed measures are generally only of use once one has some specific models of the process under consideration against which to interpret them. It is far from clear from this chapter that the study of development in autobiographical memory has yet reached this stage. From the tenor of Fitzgerald's speculation on the subject, a more qualitative approach seems permissible, not to say desirable.

Some of the more effective discussions of autobiographical memory relate to work on its organization. Linton's chapter presents a striking ethological/population biological metaphor for her work in cataloging the contents of autobiographical memory. This leads her into some interesting discussion of the structure of such memory, for example in terms of "extendures," that is, experiences forming a coherent unit in memory although spread out across an extensive period of time. Such a conception undercuts the notion of autobiographical memory as a straightforward time-line record of events. This aspect of her work is extended by Neisser's thoughtful analysis of the nature of memory "events," and of the nested structure of events in experi-

ence and hence in memory. These two chapters are the most stimulating in the book. The issues they raise are fundamental to the study of autobiographical memory, as well as having resonances with other research into the structure of experience vis-a-vis which autobiographical memory work can provide an interesting counterpoint. These two chapters provide the qualitative analysis which ought to precede any serious approach to this topic, in contrast to the primarily quantitative approach of many other chapters here.

Retrieval strategies in autobiographical memory are likewise interestingly analyzed in terms of the knowledge structures which characterize long-term memory, in the chapter by Reiser, Black, and Kalamarides. Their paper, though largely taken up with documenting such strategies in adults, nevertheless concludes with a more specific and plausible speculation on the origins of childhood amnesia than did Wetzler and Sweeney—namely that it reflects the inefficiency of adult retrieval strategies vis-a-vis early childhood knowledge structures.

Overall, this book has set itself an ambitious target which it does not always reach. The subject matter is difficult, presenting methodological problems not faced by more traditional memory research as well as new conceptual challenges. In the context of a branch of research only just gathering momentum, it is inevitable that this collection of essays should raise interesting issues rather than offering specific theories. But one reads the book with an (intermittently) recurring suspicion that psychology has not yet fully acknowledged the strictures from its Cognitive Science fellows against measurement at the expense of reflection. On the evidence of this book, genuine difficulties in the subject are not always acknowledged by all of its practitioners, there is here something of the sensation of a field still dedicated to quantification above all—perhaps epitomized by Rubin et al's construction of a "retention-function" premised on the extraordinary assumption that individuals encode an equal number of autobiographical memories each day of their lives—not for these authors Neisser's or Linton's reflections on the parameters of "a memory," nor Reisser et al's concern with process.