Children’s Use of Autobiographical Memories During Social Problem-Solving
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Introduction

Directive Function of Autobiographical Memory
- The directive function involves using episodic memories to solve problems and to guide planning and decision-making (Pillemer, 2003; Bluck, Alea, Habermas, & Rubin, 2005).
- Social problem-solving represents a domain in which researchers believe autobiographical memories serve a directive function.

Autobiographical Memory & Social Problem-Solving
- Adults who generate more specific autobiographical memories in response to cue words also perform better on social problem-solving tasks (Goddard, Dritschel, & Burton, 1996; Breman, Pushkar, Etezadi, Bye, & Conway, 2007).
- Adults who report thinking about specific memories during a social problem-solving task perform better on the task (Goddard, Dritschel, & Burton, 1996).

Gender Differences
- When interviewed about a wide variety of topics, women consistently recount more specific memories than men (Pillemer, Wink, DiDonato, & Sanborn, 2003).
- Women recall more specific autobiographical memories in response to cue words and also perform better on social problem-solving tasks compared to men (Goddard, Dritschel, & Burton, 1998).

Purpose
- The purpose of the present study was to determine:
  1. If children spontaneously mention or report thinking about specific or general autobiographical memories during social problem-solving.
  2. Whether there is a correlation between the number of memories reported during social problem-solving and the number of solutions provided.
  3. The extent to which gender differences exist in children’s reliance on memories of past episodes to solve social problems.

Method

Participants
- 83 children (54 females, 29 males), ages 10 to 15 years old (M=12 years 9 months).
- Recruited from two Destination Imagination summer camps, which teach children problem-solving skills, creativity, and cooperation.
- High school students (the majority had college or graduate degrees).

Procedure
- Children were interviewed individually using a structured social cognitive interview.
- The social cognitive interview consisted of six hypothetical social dilemmas.

Coding
- Two researchers independently coded interview transcripts for the number of solutions children generated.
- Autobiographical memories serve a directive function.

Results

Incidence of Autobiographical Memories
- The average number of problems in which children mentioned autobiographical memories was 1.81 (out of 6 total problems).
- 73.5% of children reported thinking about at least one autobiographical memory during the interview.
- Age was significantly and positively correlated with the number of problems in which children mentioned general autobiographical memories.

Autobiographical Memories & Problem-Solving
- Overall, the more problems in which children recalled personal episodes, the more total solutions children generated.
- Children who reported an autobiographical memory while solving a problem tended to provide a greater number of solutions to that problem.

Gender Differences
- Girls provided significantly more total solutions across the interview.
- Girls mentioned general memories on more problems (M = 1.52 problems) than boys (M = 1.00 problems).

Conclusions

- Recalling personal episodes appears to be an effective strategy for generating multiple solutions to social problems.
- Both boys and girls use autobiographical memories during social problem-solving, with girls using general memories more often than boys.
- Given Destination Imagination’s emphasis on problem-solving and high levels of parental education, the children in the study represent a unique sample.
- A question for future research is whether children with more diverse backgrounds similarly utilize personal episodes while solving social problems.

References


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