

REVIEWS

David B. Pillemer. *Momentous Events, Vivid Memories*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998. 256 pp. ISBN 0-674-58205-5, \$35.00.

People often have vivid memories of momentous events, including traumatic war experiences, the deaths of public figures, marriage proposals, and graduation ceremonies. These seemingly diverse memories, which Pillemer terms personal event memories, have several features in common. Each memory corresponds to a specific moment or event, rather than a general event or a series of events; each contains many details of the rememberer's personal circumstances; and each is filled with sensory information that promotes a sense of reexperiencing the event. In his book, *Momentous Events, Vivid Memories*, Pillemer, a Psychology professor and memory researcher, describes how we use vivid memories for significant events to learn from experience and form a meaningful life story.

Pillemer's concept of personal event memories includes several types of memories—including traumatic and "flashbulb" memories—traditionally studied separately by cognitive psychologists. Most people can remember specific details about where they were when they heard that President John F. Kennedy was shot, or when they heard that the Challenger shuttle had exploded. These "flashbulb memories" are rich in sensory detail. Similarly, survivors of terrifying traumatic events, such as the bombing of Hiroshima or Hurricane Andrew, may have detailed memories, sometimes called "flashbacks." Pillemer also includes "insight" memories to account for the detailed descriptions of epiphany that scientists, artists, and everyday people sometimes provide. Finally, included in Pillemer's analysis are memories for "critical incidents," defining moments in people's lives, such as arriving on a college campus for the first time.

The focus of the book—naturally occurring personal event memories—differs from the focus of memory research traditionally performed by cognitive psychologists. Unlike laboratory memory research that asks college students to memorize lists of words or numbers, Pillemer's work, while still primarily empirical in nature, is more concerned with the personal significance of emotionally-laden events than with the absolute accuracy or processing details of memory for the mundane.

By definition, personal event memories are important to people. Pillemer describes how such memories form a "skeleton" for people's autobiographies. His review of breakthrough research by developmental psychologists

documenting the development of children's ability to form autobiographical narratives is especially thorough and fascinating. As children learn to speak, they begin to develop a narrative about their lives. Through young childhood, children refine their life stories with the help of adults who teach children rules about how to remember important details and explain them to others. By adulthood, people have many personal event memories and sophisticated skills for sharing complex autobiographical stories.

Pillemer explains how personal event memories can dramatically affect human behavior. Previous memory researchers have suggested that people experience similar situations and, over time, develop scripts that help them plan how to act the next time they are in a similar situation. For example, after taking the bus several times, people develop an idea of how each subsequent trip will go. Pillemer points out that one-time events can guide behavior directly. He describes a college student who took a bus to a late-night event, only to discover that the return trip did not run at the time he wanted to leave the event. The result was a long walk home, and the student reported that he carefully checked the bus schedule after that one event.

This example is, in some ways, analogous to the ways a one-time traumatic event can influence future behavior. People who experience traumatic events often retain a detailed memory of the event and tend to avoid situations that bring up that memory. Even when trauma survivors have little or no accessible conscious narrative account of the traumatic event, their implicit memory may function so powerfully as to motivate dramatic changes in behavior. Unlike all other personal event memories, however, traumatic memories are often either so unavailable or so intrusive (or a disturbing combination of unavailable in part and intrusive in other parts—as when only a small part of a traumatic event is remembered over and over) as to be problematic for trauma survivors.

Pillemer provides many examples of traumatic memories in the book. Traumatic memories meet all of the criteria of personal event memories, and the connection between everyday and traumatic personal event memories is an important one. Traumatic memories are special in several respects, however, and at times we wished some of Pillemer's insights about personal event memories were more thoroughly examined with respect to traumatic memories in particular. For example, Pillemer introduces the concept that memories may trigger emotional states, as well as the other way around, as has been most often studied. This concept has profound implications both for mundane and traumatic memories. If the memory of a traumatic event has the power to affect emotions, then avoiding having the memory, not just avoiding the traumatic event from recurring, becomes the goal. For survivors of trauma, memories take on just this power. A cen-

tral thesis of the book is that memories, not just events themselves, have an impact on people. Perhaps nowhere is this more true than for survivors of terrifying events. This discussion could have been improved by a more complete and explicit description of this process.

While some points could have been clearer, the book offers several insights especially relevant to traumatic memories. Pillemer discusses evidence for two memory systems: imagistic and narrative. Flashbacks seem to be essentially sensory memories that have not been stored in the usual, narrative way. Pillemer goes on to provide an important synopsis of the process of transferring sensory memories to narrative form. This discussion is enhanced by taking in the broader issue of constructing an autobiographical self, an important theme in the book.

Although the book does not thoroughly review the trauma memory literature, much of Pillemer's discussion is applicable to the central issues in this area. Pillemer specifically explains how talking about stressful events with others helps store memories as part of an ongoing narrative. Pillemer also reviews literature pointing to the important role adults have in guiding this process for children. This discussion is particularly relevant to betrayal trauma theory (see Freyd). According to this theory, memories of interpersonal trauma are less likely to be remembered continuously than are memories for traumas that do not involve betrayal. People who experience betrayal traumas, such as intrafamilial abuse, are unlikely to discuss their experience with other people, and children are especially unlikely to discuss their experience with caring adults. Pillemer's discussion of the importance of relationships with others in integrating memories into a narrative may be particularly valuable in understanding why survivors of betrayal traumas very often have amnesia for traumatic events as well as unintegrated imagistic flashbacks to the events.

Pillemer's book is remarkable in the comprehensive way the concept of personal event memories spans a great number of personally significant memories. The wide coverage is even more impressive in the context of insightful discussions on basic memory systems and child development. This book is an accessible and intriguing introduction to personally significant memories, presenting new and intriguing ideas about the role of autobiographical memory in people's lives.

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WORKS CITED

- Freyd, J. J. *Betrayal Trauma: The Logic of Forgetting Childhood Abuse*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1996.