

Change, conflict act as milestones of life memories

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Connie Svob

(Medical Xpress)—What will your kids remember about the life stories you tell them? New University of Alberta research shows that they're likely to be able to recall transitional moments you share with them, be it promotions or pets. The research offers strong evidence that societal values significantly affect how people think about and recall events in their lives—and how we potentially carry old values and beliefs forward in a new country.

Psychology researchers Connie Svob and Norman Brown conducted interviews with two groups of participants, split evenly between people

born in Canada and people whose parents emigrated from a country in upheaval. Each group was asked to identify the 10 most important events in their lives, when they occurred and whether the event had a [psychological impact](#) on them.

The results paint similar pictures of what people considered important, but showed striking differences in terms of the milestone events that often served as a backdrop.

"We were mainly interested in the historical context and how that gets transmitted," said Svob. "When a parent has lived through a historical event, how does that get passed on to the next generation—and to what extent does it get passed on?"

Marking transitions: Dogs and divorce

Education, birth, death and marriage were among the top five major events mentioned by both groups, and most other major types of life events were separated by only a couple of percentage points.

What separated the groups were distinct elements or life markers that only appeared within one group. Seven per cent of what was labelled the conflict group recounted historical events their parents lived through, or their [military service](#). Among the non-conflict group, six per cent cited attendance at a major sporting event, or the acquisition or loss of a [family pet](#).

"We seem to be positively predisposed to detect and remember change," said Svob. "This [cognitive capacity](#) appears to extend to higher levels of cognition—specifically, the ways in which we remember our lives and our histories."

Tying life to historical context: The Cup and coups

The researchers also asked participants to tie the events in their parents' lives to [historical events](#). Svob notes that 25 per cent of the events mentioned by the conflict group were related to wars or other strife. For the Canadian contingent, the respondents anchored the memories to another type of conflict: sporting events.

"That's our history—the Stanley Cup, the riots, the Olympics—that's probably what we're going to remember," she said.

Thanks for the memories: Remembrance and public impact

Svob says Edmonton and the U of A were ideal places to undertake a research project like this, noting the city's rich and open ethnic diversity, and the institution's diverse international student base.

She says determining what people retain from their cultural history has benefits in terms of helping them retain their identity. But she notes that it also identifies lingering cultural issues related to ethnic out-groups—issues that become important to manage, especially in Canada's ever-expanding cultural landscape.

She hopes the results from the study can be used to develop ways of bridging these narratives to the Canadian context, ensuring that newcomers thrive in adopting the peace and harmony of their new home.

"We were able to collect data that explore potentially contentious issues," said Svob. "It implies that the conflict-knowledge—and its related attitudes and beliefs—are carried forward among first-generation Canadians.

"To minimize xenophobia in Canada, interventions in schools and within other transition-related immigration programs could happen at the level of parental narratives concerning their war experiences."

Provided by University of Alberta

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