
Self-Esteem Memories: Feeling Good About Achievement Success, Feeling Bad About Relationship Distress

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College students and middle-aged adults provided memories of occasions when they felt especially good or especially bad about themselves. Probes directed the memory search to several age intervals during childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Predominant themes represented in self-esteem memories differed consistently as a function of emotional valence. Memories of positive self-worth frequently focused on achievement/mastery themes, whereas memories of negative self-worth frequently focused on interpersonal/affiliation themes. When people evaluate the self through the lens of autobiographical memory, interpersonal distress is portrayed as especially damaging and achievement success is portrayed as especially enhancing. The asymmetry between positive and negative self-esteem memories is explained using multiple theoretical perspectives within social and personality psychology.

Key words: *autobiographical memory; self-esteem; achievement themes; interpersonal themes*

The present series of studies examines representations of self-worth in autobiographical memories. We elicited narrative accounts of particular life episodes when respondents felt especially good and especially bad about themselves. What can an autobiographical memory approach add to existing research on self-esteem? Can an analysis of personal event memories provide unique and valuable information about the organization and function of positive and negative self-evaluations?

Researchers representing a broad range of psychological specialties have concluded that autobiographical memory and the self are intimately intertwined (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Fivush & Haden, 2003; McAdams, 2001; Ross & Wilson, 2003; Singer, 2004; Singer & Salovey, 1993; Thorne & Michaelieu, 1996; Wood & Conway, 2006). Conway and Pleydell-Pearce (2000) identified an emerging “consensus that autobiographical memory and the self are very closely related, even, according to some theorists, *intrinsically related* so that autobiographical memory is a part of the self” (p. 264). As such, narrative accounts of specific past episodes are a potentially valuable but presently underutilized source of data on feelings of self-worth.

Autobiographical memories are more than static records of experiences that happened to a past self. Themes represented in memories of salient life events reflect motives, beliefs, plans, goals, and meanings (Bluck & Gluck, 2004; Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; McAdams, Hoffman, Mansfield, & Day, 1996; Pillemer,

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1998, 2003; Singer & Salovey, 1993; Thorne, McLean, & Lawrence, 2004; Thorne & Michaelieu, 1996). Self-defining autobiographical memories are “the building blocks of ongoing identity” (Singer, 2004, p. 442), and they “lie at the heart of the self-concept” (Thorne et al., 2004, p. 515). Implicit motives are reflected thematically in personal memories (Woike, Mcleod, & Goggin, 2003), and recollections of past episodes continue to provide directives for what to pursue and what to avoid in the present and future (Bluck & Gluck, 2004; Pillemer, 2003). Self and directive functions appear prominently in analyses of how people use autobiographical memories in everyday life (Bluck, 2003; Bluck, Alea, Habermas, & Rubin, 2005; Pillemer, 1992, 1998). Memories representing moments of especially high and low self-esteem in childhood and adolescence may contribute strongly to a developing sense of self, and they may identify life circumstances to be pursued or avoided in the future.

In the present research, content analyses of personal memories were conducted to identify distinctive qualities of positive versus negative self-regard. Although we use the descriptive term *self-esteem memories* to convey an explicit focus on evaluations of the self, the memories themselves do not serve as a measure of trait self-esteem. They describe particular instances of unusually high or low self-regard rather than provide a quantitative metric of how positive or how negative a person feels about the self.

Although self-esteem memories do not provide a quantitative index of self-worth, they may inform the debate about the structure of self-esteem. Global self-esteem is commonly portrayed as a one-dimensional construct, in which feeling good and feeling bad about the self occupy opposite ends of a single continuum. An alternative view holds that self-esteem is separable into positive and negative components. Elliot and Mapes (2005) summarized the case for distinctive positive and negative dimensions of self-esteem: “Clearly, much information is lost when a composite self-esteem index is computed and utilized alone in empirical research. By keeping positive and negative self-esteem separate, additional precision may be acquired regarding the nature of self-esteem” (p. 179). They encouraged psychologists to create “innovative research paradigms” that may illuminate the independent contributions of positive and negative self-regard. We propose that one such paradigm involves comparing representations of self-worth in positive and negative autobiographical memories.

Our approach extends previous research on self-esteem that also has employed an autobiographical memory paradigm. One prominent strategy involves conducting independent assessments of self-esteem and memory and then searching for associations between the two. For example, Thorne and Michaelieu (1996) examined the

relationship between self-esteem and memory content in a sample of young adults. Self-esteem was assessed using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and the Self Descriptive Q-set. Participants also were asked to provide memories involving relationships with other people. As expected, the association between self-esteem (Q-set scores only) and memory content differed for males and females, with high-self-esteem males recounting events that focused on wanting to assert themselves with other males, and high-self-esteem females recounting events that focused on wanting to help female friends.

Our approach differs from Thorne and Michealieu’s (1996) in several respects. Thorne and Michaelieu assessed self-esteem with standard tests, and their memory probes did not target moments of especially high or low self-regard. In fact, the authors noted that when using their probes, “memories that were relevant to self-esteem were relatively few in number” (p. 1388). In contrast, our probes were designed specifically to elicit memories that represented explicitly self-evaluative episodes. In addition, Thorne and Michaelieu did not target differences between positive and negative memories, but such a comparison is the central feature of the present research. Finally, Thorne and Michaelieu explicitly requested memories involving relationships with other people. No such restriction was placed on the memories obtained in the present study, and one of our primary content coding categories involves the presence or absence of interpersonal themes.

Our efforts to identify distinctive aspects of self-esteem memories led us to the psychological literature on basic human concerns and motivations. One prominent approach focuses on the distinction between an achievement/mastery/agentive orientation and an interpersonal/affiliative/communal orientation (McAdams, 1982, 2001; McAdams et al., 1996; Woike et al., 2003; Woike, Gershkovich, Piorkowski, & Polo, 1999). A popular research strategy involves assessing motivational styles with the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) and then looking for relationships between motives and autobiographical memory themes. For example, Woike et al. (1999, Study 1) assessed college students’ agentive and communal motives using responses to TAT pictures. Participants also recalled a specific positive or negative event. The memories were coded as agentive (involving themes of achievement, recognition, accomplishment) or communal (involving themes of intimacy, friendship, social acceptance). Individuals whose motives were identified as primarily agentive tended to recall memories with agentive themes, and individuals whose motives were identified as primarily communal tended to recall memories with communal themes. Other studies have reported similar patterns of associations between motives and memories (see McAdams, 2001, for a summary).

Major approaches to the study of motivation within social and personality psychology also have identified central human needs that closely resemble the concepts of achievement/agency and communion/intimacy. For example, Deci and Ryan (2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000) made a case for “three innate or fundamental psychological needs” that include “competence, autonomy, and relatedness” (p. 262). Feeling competent and connected to others are necessary conditions for high self-esteem (Ryan & Deci, 2000). If competence and relatedness are basic motives that directly affect self-esteem, themes of achievement and intimacy should be prominently represented in autobiographical representations of self-worth.

Whereas previous memory studies using the agentic-communal distinction have focused on predicting individual differences in memory content using motive classifications or scores, our approach looks instead for differences in memory themes as a function of emotional valence. Requests for episodes in which people feel especially “good or bad about themselves,” rather than simply “good or bad” or “happy or sad,” capture the affectively charged evaluations that characterize self-esteem (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). If positive and negative self-esteem memories consistently focus on contrasting themes, this would be consistent with the idea that self-esteem is best described as a bidimensional construct.

The studies presented here are part of a broader program of research on autobiographical memory. Our initial analyses addressed a different theoretical issue—the temporal organization of memories—and results concerning age distributions (using the same database as the present research) are reported separately (Collins, Pillemer, Ivcevic, & Gooze, in press). In several studies, college students or middle-aged adults recounted events occurring between ages 8 and 18 in which they felt especially good or especially bad about themselves. We discovered that the age distribution of positive and negative memories differed markedly. The distribution of positive memories showed a sharp age-related rise, with a peak at ages 17 and 18. In contrast, the age distribution of negative memories was relatively flat, with no precipitous rise at ages 17 and 18.

Content analyses of positive and negative memories from ages 17 and 18 were conducted in an attempt to explain the divergent age distributions. A substantial proportion of positive memories from ages 17 and 18 focused on predictable achievement milestones, such as high school graduation or college acceptance. When we expanded our analyses to include memories from ages other than 17 and 18, we made the more general and unexpected discovery that positive and negative self-esteem memories consistently portray different themes. This content difference is the focus of the present paper.

STUDY 1

Method

Participants. Participants included 92 students (M age = 20.7 years) attending Wellesley College, a liberal arts college for women. With respect to ethnicity, 72.8% of participants self-identified as Caucasian, 12.0% as Asian, 6.5% as Black or African American, 3.3% as Hispanic, and 5.4% as mixed. Participants tended to come from well-educated families: 84.8% of mothers and 80.4% of fathers were college graduates.

Measures. Each participant completed a questionnaire. The first section asked participants to provide their age, gender, and ethnic background; to indicate the highest level of education attained by each of their parents; and to describe their own educational history. The second section consisted of Rosenberg’s (1965) global self-esteem scale. The test consists of 10 statements that are answered on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 4 (*strongly disagree*). Items address global feelings about the self (e.g., “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself”).

The third section consisted of three memory prompts and a number of follow-up questions for each memory. The first two memory prompts directed participants to describe in detail a specific memory of one time when they felt “especially good” about themselves between the ages of 8 and 18, and to describe in detail a specific memory of one time when they felt “especially bad” about themselves between the ages of 8 and 18. One half of the participants (alternating according to their identification code) gave a positive memory first and one half gave a negative memory first. The third prompt asked participants to provide an additional memory involving an experience of feeling either “especially good” or “especially bad” about the self; the choice of either a positive or negative memory was left to the respondents. Participants also completed brief memory rating scales, which were unrelated to the purposes of the present study.

Procedure. Groups of volunteer participants were tested in quiet locations on campus. Participants initially were presented with a brief written introduction explaining their right to confidentiality and to discontinue their participation at any time. Once they had read the introduction, they signed a voluntary consent form and were allotted as much time as necessary to complete the questionnaire. When finished, they received a debriefing form and \$5.00 payment.

Content coding. Coding categories were adapted from Woike et al. (2003). Memories with an achievement/

mastery orientation pertain primarily to events that are experienced as meeting (or not meeting) a personal standard of excellence. Positive examples include success, recognition, and accomplishment. Negative examples include defeat and failure to achieve a goal. Memories with an interpersonal/affiliation orientation pertain primarily to experiences that are directly related to being with others. Positive examples include enjoyable social experiences, love, intimacy, friendship, understanding between people, and social acceptance. Negative examples include betrayal of trust or loyalty, dishonesty, lack of understanding between people, and social rejection. The two content categories are not mutually exclusive, and some memories prominently contained both achievement/mastery and interpersonal/affiliation themes, as when the joy of personal achievement is shared in a significant way with loved ones. Memories focusing on themes other than achievement or interpersonal relationships were designated as neither; examples include obtaining tickets for a special concert or getting riding lessons for a birthday present. Two trained researchers independently coded all memories, and all disagreements were resolved by discussion. Intercoder agreement was 94.0% for the presence or absence of a prominent achievement theme and 90.8% for the presence or absence of a prominent interpersonal theme.

Results

Because the pattern of results was unaffected by task order, data obtained using the two different orders were combined. Figure 1 presents percentages of memories assigned to each of the four coding categories. The distribution of memory themes differs markedly for positive and negative memories. A majority (54%) of positive self-esteem memories focused primarily on achievement themes, 17% focused on interpersonal themes, 25% prominently involved both achievement and interpersonal themes, and 3% involved neither theme. In contrast, most (79%) of the negative self-esteem memories focused primarily on interpersonal themes, 11% focused on achievement themes, 5% involved both themes, and 4% involved neither theme. When the “pure” achievement and interpersonal categories were combined with the “both” category, a pronounced asymmetry is still apparent. Most (79%) positive memories but only 16% of negative memories represented an achievement theme, either singularly or in combination with an interpersonal theme, $\chi^2(1, N = 92) = 52.40, p < .001$ (a McNemar test for correlated proportions was used in this and all other comparisons involving repeated measures). In contrast, 85% of negative memories but only 42% of positive memories represented an interpersonal theme, either singularly or in combination with an achievement theme, $\chi^2(1, N = 92) = 33.58, p < .001$.

To determine whether the distributions of achievement and interpersonal memories are dependent on trait self-esteem, the median score on the Rosenberg self-esteem scale was used to divide the sample into high- and low-self-esteem groups. Group differences were not statistically significant.

Memories given in response to the open-ended probe (presented to respondents after the two directed memory probes) also were coded for thematic content. When given the choice between describing a time when they felt especially good or bad about the self, a majority of respondents (57%) provided a positive memory. Clear differences in memory themes were evident. For positive memories, 53% of memories focused on achievement themes, 39% focused on interpersonal themes, and 8% included both themes. For negative memories, 79% focused on interpersonal themes, 16% focused on achievement themes, 3% involved both themes, and 3% involved neither theme. When the achievement and interpersonal categories were combined with the “both” category, 61% of positive memories but only 18% of negative memories included an achievement theme, $\chi^2(1, N = 89) = 15.97, p < .001$. In contrast, 82% of negative memories but only 47% of positive memories included an interpersonal theme, $\chi^2(1, N = 89) = 10.99, p = .001$.

STUDY 2

Study 1 identified pronounced content differences between positive and negative self-esteem memories. Positive memories frequently focused on achievement themes, whereas negative memories frequently focused on interpersonal themes. Because gender differences may exist in the themes represented in memories (e.g., Thorne & Michaelieu, 1996), participants in Study 2 included men and women.

Method

Participants. Participants included 43 women and 51 men (M age = 20.3 years) attending Babson College. Participants were enlisted through announcements in large sophomore seminars or recruited with advertisements posted in the student center. With respect to ethnicity, 79.8% of participants self-identified as Caucasian, 8.5% as Asian, 5.3% as Hispanic, 1.1% as Black or African American, and 5.3% as mixed/other. With respect to family education, 71.3% of mothers and fathers were college graduates.

Measures and procedure. Test materials and procedures in Study 2 were identical to those in Study 1.

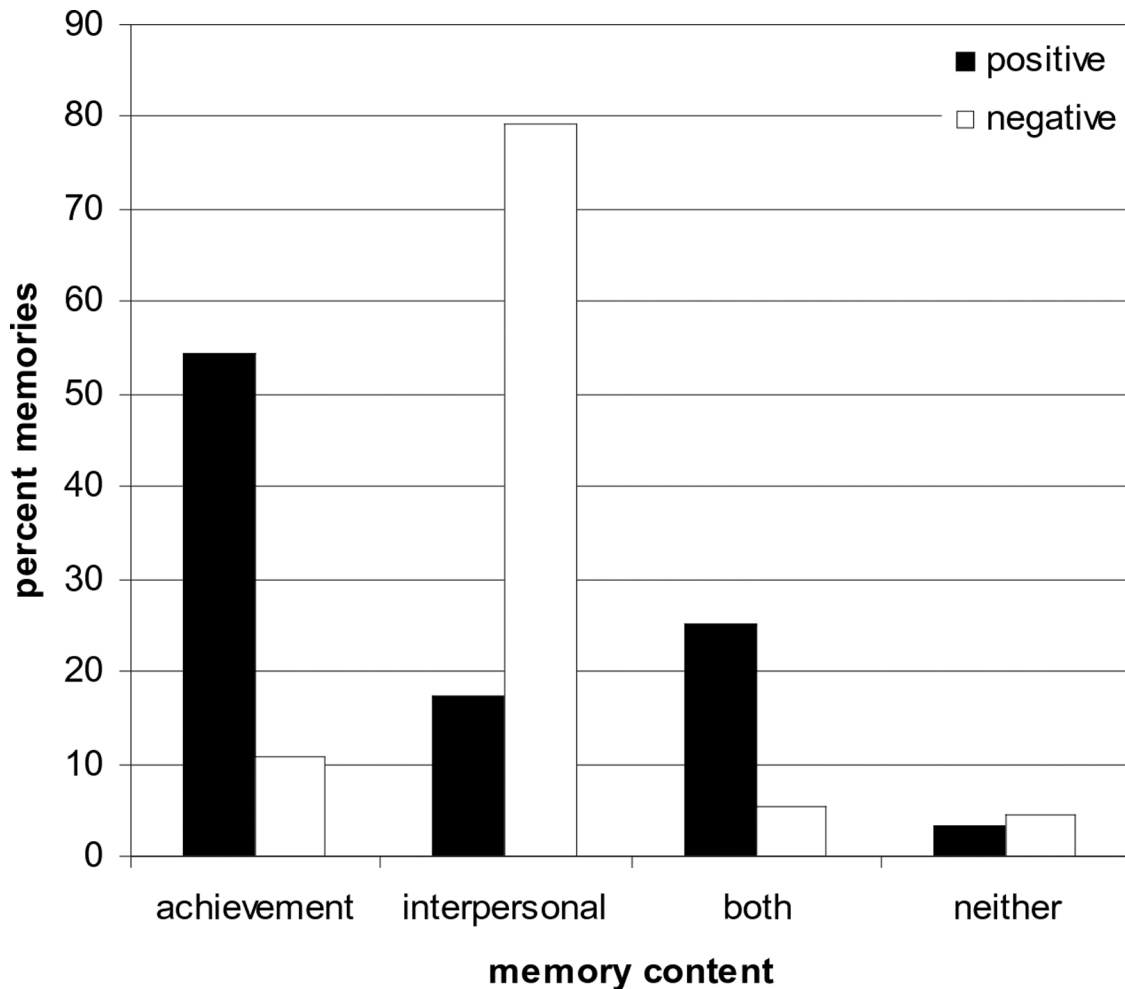


Figure 1 Content of positive and negative self-esteem memories between ages 8 and 18 for Wellesley College women (Study 1).

Content coding. As in Study 1, two coders assigned all memories to one of four thematic orientations: achievement/mastery, interpersonal/affiliation, both, and neither. Intercoder agreement was 89.7% for the presence or absence of a prominent achievement theme, and 87.5% for the presence or absence of a prominent interpersonal theme.

Results

Because the pattern of results was unaffected by task order, the data obtained using the two orders were combined. Figure 2 presents percentages of memories assigned to each of the four content categories. As was found in Study 1, distributions for positive and negative memories differ dramatically. A majority (57%) of positive memories focused primarily on achievement

themes, 22% focused on interpersonal themes, 20% involved both themes, and no memories were assigned to the “neither” category. In contrast, 72% of negative memories focused primarily on interpersonal themes, 17% focused on achievement themes, 6% involved both categories, and 4% involved neither category. When the achievement and interpersonal categories were combined with the “both” category, 78% of positive memories but only 23% of negative memories contained an achievement theme either alone or in combination with an interpersonal theme, $\chi^2(1, N = 94) = 47.17, p < .001$. In contrast, 79% of negative memories but only 43% of positive memories contained an interpersonal theme either alone or in combination with an achievement theme, $\chi^2(1, N = 94) = 24.75, p < .001$.

To determine whether memory content is dependent on trait self-esteem, the Rosenberg median score was used to

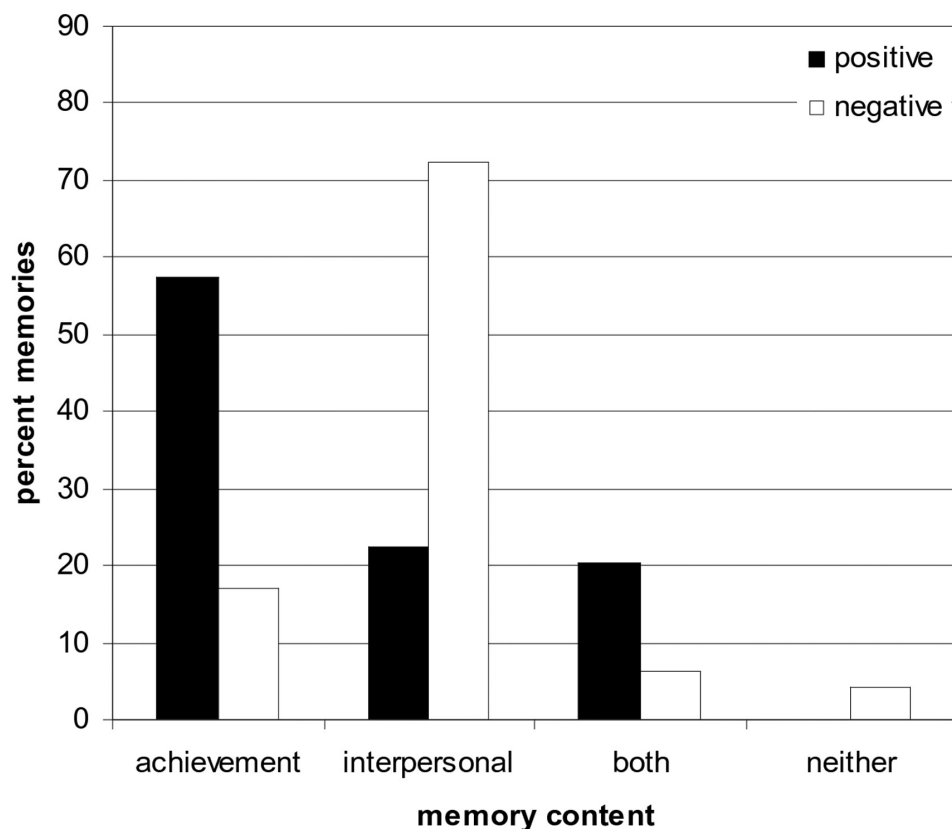


Figure 2 Content of positive and negative self-esteem memories between ages 8 and 18 for Babson College students (Study 2).

divide the sample into high- and low-self-esteem groups. Group differences were not statistically significant.

Predominant memory themes described by men and women were compared. Statistically significant gender differences were observed for the negative memory only. Females (88%) were more likely than males (71%) to provide a negative memory that contained an interpersonal theme, $\chi^2(1, N = 94) = 4.40, p = .036$. In contrast, males (31%) were more likely than females (14%) to provide a negative memory that contained an achievement theme, $\chi^2(1, N = 94) = 3.95, p = .047$.

Content analyses also were conducted on responses to the open-ended memory prompt. A majority (77%) of respondents chose to describe a time when they felt especially good about the self. Although the open-ended prompt elicited only a small number of negative memories, a strong association between emotional valence and memory content is still evident. For positive memories, 41% focused on an achievement theme, 32%

focused on an interpersonal theme, 19% involved both themes, and 9% involved neither theme. For negative memories, 71% focused on an interpersonal theme, 24% focused on an achievement theme, and 5% involved both themes. When the achievement and interpersonal categories were combined with the “both” category, 59% of positive memories and 29% of negative memories included an achievement theme, $\chi^2(1, N = 90) = 6.14, p = .013$. In contrast, 76% of negative memories and 51% of positive memories included an interpersonal theme, $\chi^2(1, N = 90) = 4.25, p = .039$.

STUDY 3

Studies 1 and 2 identified a strong and consistent difference between positive and negative self-esteem memories. Most episodes of negative self-regard focused directly on interpersonal problems or disappointments,

whereas a majority of positive episodes focused on achievement successes. The strong relationship between emotional valence and memory content could be influenced by the request for memories of events occurring between the ages of 8 and 18. For our college student participants, the older ages of this life period are marked by well-established positive achievement milestones, including high school graduation, academic and extracurricular awards, and college acceptance. Participants in Study 3 were middle-aged adults who provided memories from two different life periods: ages 8 to 18 and ages 34 to 44. Study 3 provides a stronger test of a general tendency for positive self-esteem memories to focus on achievement successes and for negative self-esteem memories to focus on interpersonal problems.

Method

Participants. Participants were alumnae of the Wellesley graduating classes of 1978 and 1979 who were contacted by mail and asked to complete a questionnaire. In a first mailing, questionnaires were sent to a random sample of 248 members of the class of 1978. Because the response rate was low (20 completed questionnaires were received), questionnaires were sent to 280 additional members of the class of 1978 and to 513 members of the class of 1979. The samples included all alumnae for whom the Wellesley College Alumnae Association had current contact information. For the first mailing, respondents returned both the questionnaire (containing highly emotional personal information) and signed consent form in the same envelope. In an attempt to increase the return rate, for the follow-up mailings the consent forms and questionnaires were returned separately. A substantial number of questionnaires could not be delivered because addresses were no longer current. In addition, several participants from the class of 1978 were omitted because they returned one of a subset of questionnaires that had been constructed improperly.

The final sample consisted of 114 alumnae, 52 from the class of 1978 and 62 from the class of 1979. The average age of participants was 46.8 years for the class of 1978 and 45.9 years for the class of 1979. Because Wellesley is a women's college, all participants were female.

Measures and procedure. Each participant completed a questionnaire she had received by mail. A cover letter briefly described the study and indicated that participation was voluntary and that responses would be kept confidential. Respondents returned the questionnaire and voluntary consent form in enclosed, stamped envelopes.

On the memory questionnaire, participants first provided their age and ethnic background. Then, participants described four specific memories. They described two memories from ages 8 to 18 and two memories from ages 34 to 44. For each age period, they described one event when they felt especially good about themselves and one event when they felt especially bad about themselves. Participants were assigned sequentially to one of eight possible memory orders. Respondents who did not provide both a positive and a negative memory for a particular age range (8 to 18 or 34 to 44) were omitted from the corresponding statistical analyses.

Two coders assigned all memories to one of four thematic categories used in Studies 1 and 2: achievement, interpersonal, both, and neither. Inter-coder agreement for memories from ages 8 to 18 was 87.7% for the presence or absence of a prominent achievement theme and 82.5% for the presence or absence of a prominent interpersonal theme. Inter-coder agreement for memories from ages 34-44 was 78.2% for the presence or absence of a prominent achievement theme and 80.1% for the presence or absence of a prominent interpersonal theme.

Results

Figure 3 presents percentages of memories from ages 8 to 18 that were assigned to each of the four content categories. As in Studies 1 and 2, positive and negative self-esteem memories portrayed different themes. A majority (60%) of positive memories focused on achievement themes, 17% focused on interpersonal themes, 15% involved both themes, and 9% involved neither theme. In contrast, 73% of negative memories focused on interpersonal themes, 10% focused on achievement themes, 10% involved both themes, and 8% involved neither theme. When the achievement and interpersonal categories were combined with the "both" category, 75% of positive memories and 19% of negative memories included an achievement theme, $\chi^2(1, N = 114) = 51.25, p < .001$. In contrast, 82% of negative memories and 32% of positive memories included an interpersonal theme, $\chi^2(1, N = 114) = 45.12, p < .001$.

Figure 4 presents percentages of memories from ages 34 to 44 that were assigned to each of the four content categories. Content differences between positive and negative memories are strong and in the expected direction, although not as dramatic as for the 8 to 18 age interval. Almost one half (48%) of positive memories focused on achievement themes, 26% focused on interpersonal themes, 20% involved both themes, and 6% involved neither theme. In contrast, 53% of negative memories focused on interpersonal themes, 19% focused on achievement themes, 15% involved both

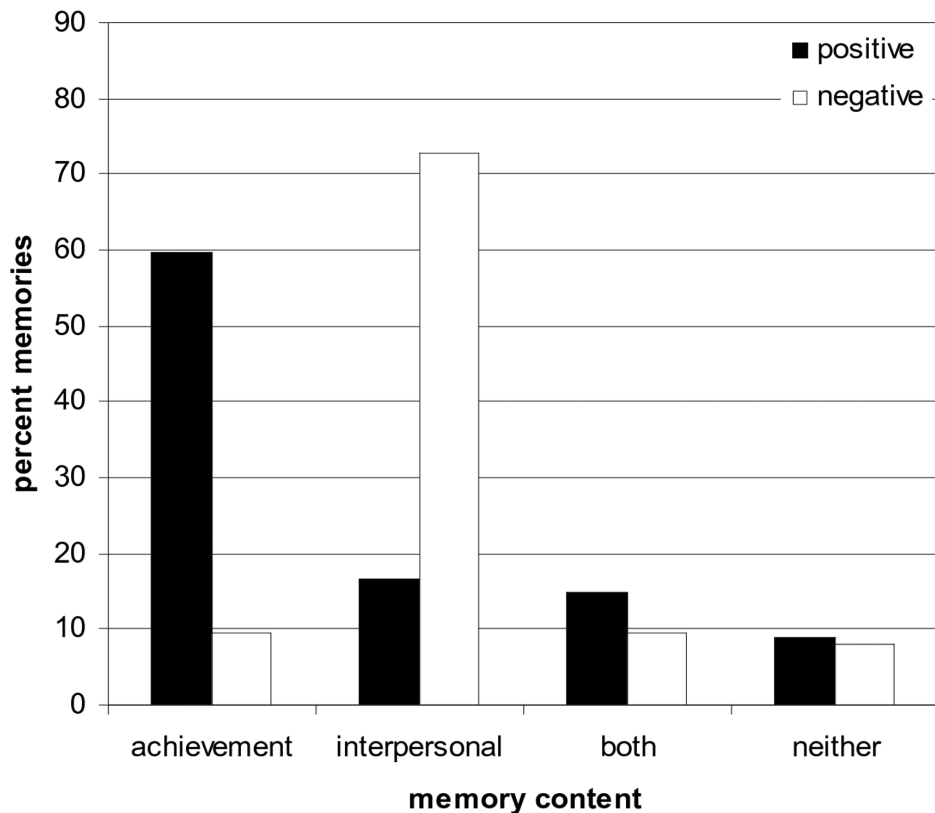


Figure 3 Content of positive and negative self-esteem memories between ages 8 and 18 for Wellesley College alumnae (Study 3).

themes, and 14% involved neither theme. When the achievement and interpersonal categories were combined with the “both” category, 69% of positive memories and 33% of negative memories included an achievement theme, $\chi^2(1, N = 108) = 26.33, p < .001$. In contrast, 68% of negative memories and 46% of positive memories included an interpersonal theme, $\chi^2(1, N = 108) = 10.76, p = .001$.

STUDY 4

Studies 1, 2, and 3 demonstrated that positive self-esteem memories from ages 8 to 18 and 34 to 44 frequently reflect achievement themes and that negative memories frequently reflect interpersonal themes. Age cues used in Study 4 were selected purposefully because they target life periods that are not characterized by predictable and prominent positive achievement landmarks: memories of earliest childhood experiences and memories of events occurring between the ages of 10 and 15.

Method

Participants. Participants included 99 women and 54 men (M age = 18.9 years) who were enrolled in psychology courses at the University of New Hampshire and who received course credit for their participation. With respect to ethnicity, 92.2% self-identified as Caucasian, 2.6% as Black or African American, 2.0% as Asian, 2.0% as Hispanic, and 1.3% as mixed race/other. With respect to family education, 58.2% of mothers and 54.3% of fathers were college graduates.

Measures and procedure. The questionnaire and procedures were similar to those employed in Studies 1 and 2 except that the memory prompts targeted different life periods. The first two memory prompts asked participants to describe in detail their earliest childhood memory of one time when they felt especially good about themselves and one time when they felt especially bad about themselves. Several memories given in response to the early childhood memory probe that were dated as occurring at age 13 or older were excluded

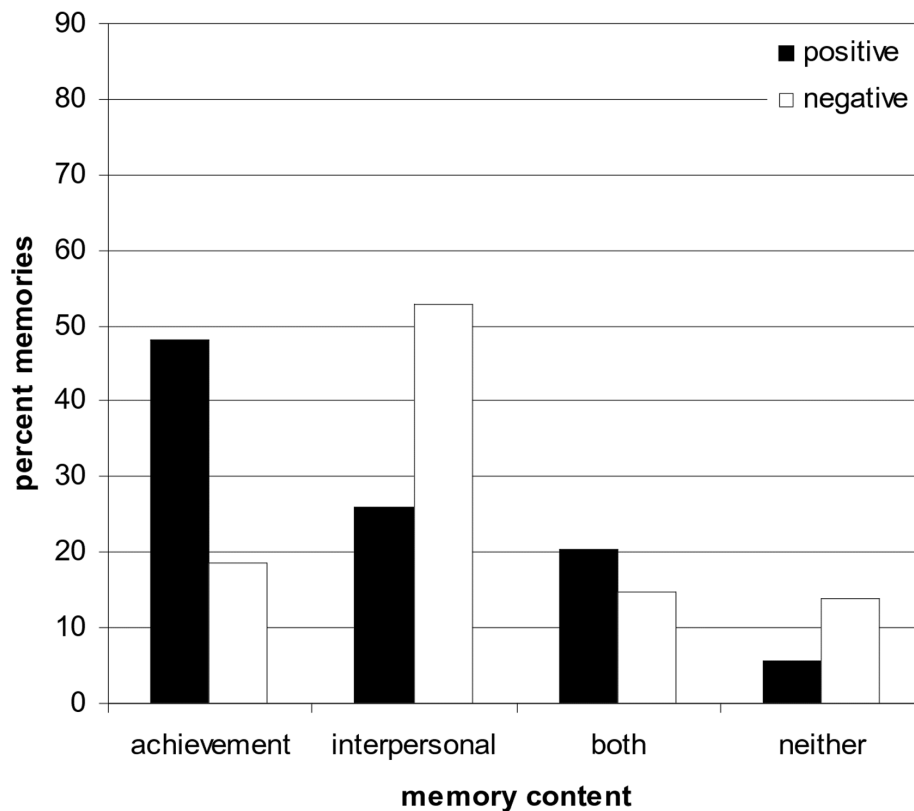


Figure 4 Content of positive and negative self-esteem memories between ages 34 and 44 for Wellesley College alumnae (Study 3).

from the analyses. The second two prompts asked for a specific memory of one time when they felt especially good about themselves between ages 10 and 15, and one time when they felt especially bad about themselves between ages 10 and 15. The order of positive and negative memories was counterbalanced. Respondents who did not provide both a positive and a negative memory for a particular life period (earliest childhood or ages 10 to 15) were omitted from the corresponding statistical analyses.

Content coding. Two coders assigned all memories to one of the thematic orientations used in Studies 1, 2, and 3: achievement/mastery and interpersonal/affiliation, both, and neither. Intercoder agreement for earliest childhood memories was 85.8% for the presence or absence of a prominent achievement theme and 84.4% for the presence or absence of a prominent interpersonal theme. Intercoder agreement for memories from ages 10 to 15 was 87.9% for the presence or absence of a prominent achievement theme and 84.8% for the presence or absence of a prominent interpersonal theme.

Results

Figure 5 presents percentages of earliest self-esteem memories assigned to each of the four content categories. As in our earlier studies, distributions of positive and negative memories are markedly different. Almost one half (46%) of positive memories focused on achievement themes, 13% focused on interpersonal themes, 36% involved both themes, and 4% involved neither theme. Most (81%) negative memories focused on interpersonal themes, 4% focused on achievement themes, 6% involved both themes, and 9% involved neither theme. When the achievement and interpersonal categories were combined with the “both” category, 82% of positive memories but only 11% of negative memories contained an achievement theme, $\chi^2(1, N = 141) = 99.01, p < .001$. In contrast, 87% of negative memories but only 50% of positive memories contained an interpersonal theme, $\chi^2(1, N = 141) = 41.60, p < .001$. These patterns were similar for males and females and for individuals scoring high and low in trait self-esteem.

Figure 6 presents percentages of memories from ages 10 to 15 that were assigned to each of the four content categories. The findings closely resemble patterns observed in

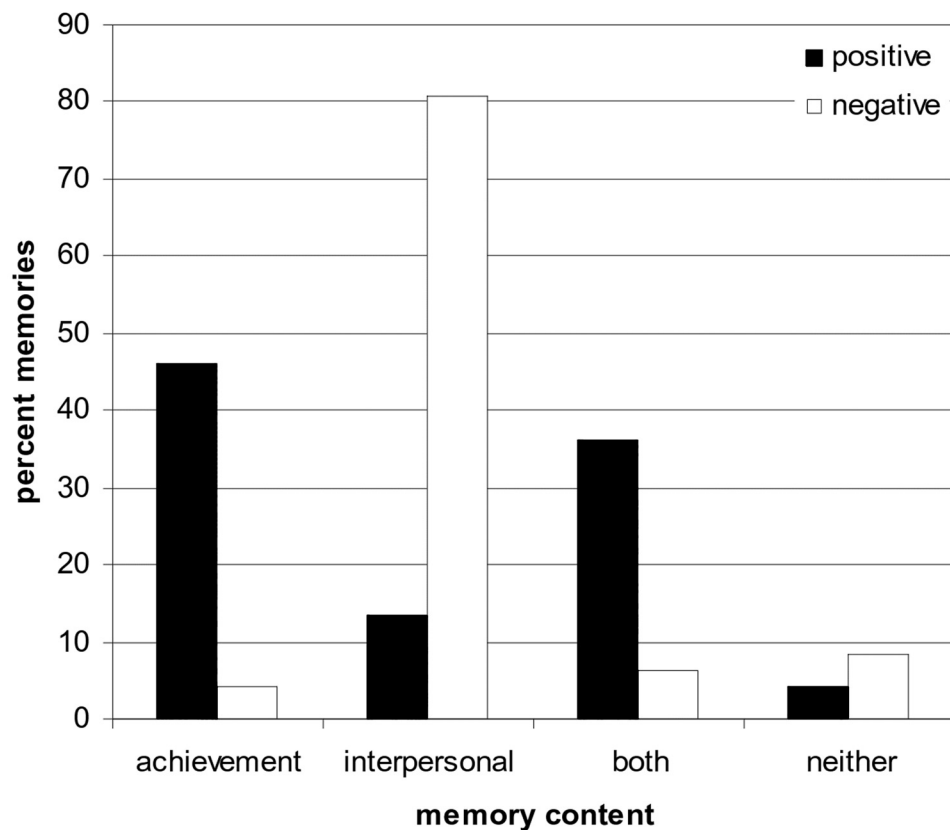


Figure 5 Content of positive and negative self-esteem memories from early childhood for University of New Hampshire students (Study 4).

earlier studies using different target ages. More than one half (51%) of positive self-esteem memories focused on achievement themes, 26% focused on interpersonal themes, 17% involved both themes, and 6% involved neither theme. Most (68%) negative memories focused on interpersonal themes, 15% focused on achievement themes, 8% involved both themes, and 10% involved neither theme. When the achievement and interpersonal categories were combined with the “both” category, 68% of positive memories but only 23% of negative memories contained an achievement theme, $\chi^2(1, N = 145) = 46.94, p < .001$. In contrast, 75% of negative memories but only 43% of positive memories contained an interpersonal theme, $\chi^2(1, N = 145) = 25.31, p < .001$. These patterns were similar for males and females and for individuals high and low in trait self-esteem.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

College students and middle-aged adults described personal episodes in which they felt especially good or

especially bad about themselves. Memories were coded for the presence of achievement/mastery and interpersonal/affiliation themes. In many life situations, motives or behaviors appear to focus primarily on social goals, achievement goals, or some combination of the two goal sets (McAdams, 2001; McAdams et al., 1996). For example, Cantor and Kihlstrom (1985) analyzed “life tasks” facing 1st-year college students and identified several main categories: social tasks, academic tasks, and tasks that required balancing social and academic concerns. With respect to self-regard, Elliot and Mapes (2005) identified an important distinction between the “competence aspect of self-esteem and the social value aspect of self-esteem” (p. 180). This distinction is well captured by the achievement and interpersonal orientations that appear so prominently in self-esteem memories.

Incidences of achievement and interpersonal themes differed markedly as a function of the emotional valence of our memory probes. Across all studies using directed memory probes, the proportions of positive self-esteem memories that included an achievement theme (either

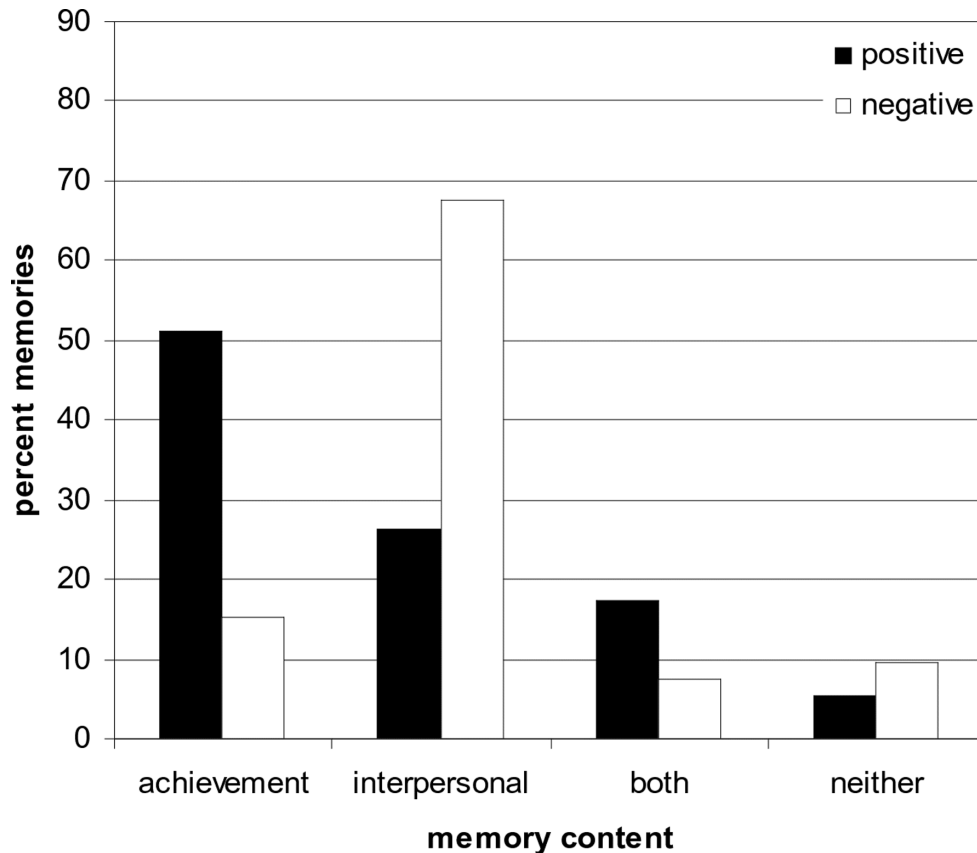


Figure 6 Content of positive and negative self-esteem memories between ages 10 and 15 for University of New Hampshire students (Study 4).

alone or in combination with an interpersonal theme) ranged from 68% to 82%, whereas the proportions of negative memories that included an achievement theme ranged from 11% to 33%. In contrast, the proportions of negative memories that included an interpersonal theme ranged from 68% to 87%, whereas the proportions of positive memories that included an interpersonal theme ranged from 32% to 50%.

Because participants were asked to recount single instances when they felt especially good or bad about the self, our main findings are limited to highly salient self-defining events (Singer & Salovey, 1993). Analyses of responses to open-ended memory probes, which participants provided after responding to the directed probes, suggest that the distinctive pattern of results may hold more generally. A strong association between emotional valence and thematic orientation was evident for open-ended memories. Future research could explore whether this relationship holds when greater numbers of self-esteem memories are elicited, thereby

providing a better opportunity for memory content to vary as a function of personality.

The relationship between type of emotion cue and memory themes was similar for males and females and for individuals scoring high and low in trait self-esteem. Because self-esteem memories represent a single past event and do not provide an assessment of the relative strength of positive and negative feelings about the self in general, the absence of a relationship with quantitative measures of self-esteem is not surprising. Future research could explore possible connections between self-esteem test scores and memories of self-evaluative episodes, using quantitative indices such as latency to recall positive versus negative self-esteem memories or the ratio of positive to negative self-esteem memories in free recall.

Why is the thematic content of positive and negative self-esteem memories so dramatically and consistently different? Our explanation rests on the assumption that themes prominently represented in autobiographical

memories reflect past—and to some extent present—goals, beliefs, and motives (e.g., Bauer & McAdams, 2004; Bluck & Gluck, 2004; Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; McAdams, 2001; Pillemer, 1998, 2003; Singer, 2004; Singer & Salovey, 1993; Thorne & Michaelieu, 1996). According to Conway and Holmes (2004), “Highly accessible autobiographical memories will be those that had high self-relevance when originally encoded, and the most accessible will be those that retain this high level of self-relevance at retrieval” (p. 462). Because we targeted moments of unusually high or low self-regard, predominant memory themes should represent participants’ deeply felt satisfactions and disappointments with respect to the self.

Elliot and Mapes (2005) provide a useful conceptual framework for interpreting our main findings. These authors contend that self-esteem is bidimensional, with distinct positive and negative components. To improve the self-concept, for example, people may wish to actively enhance their standing on certain life tasks and to avoid deterioration on a different set of tasks (Elliot & Mapes, 2005). Because our participants consistently identified interpersonal problems or disappointments as defining moments of low self-regard, one may presume that many of them share the goal of avoiding such aversive social occurrences. Similarly, because they frequently identified achievement successes as defining moments of high self-regard, one may presume that they are strongly motivated to approach life situations that offer opportunities for individual mastery. Of course, people also may elevate their sense of self-worth by seeking out rewarding social relationships and by eluding achievement failures, but pursuing positive achievement experiences and avoiding negative interpersonal outcomes were represented far more prominently in our respondents’ memory narratives.

Most negative memories represented an interpersonal orientation, whereas positive memories focused on social themes less frequently. Research in a variety of domains indicates that problematical social relationships exert a profound negative influence on people’s lives and that the impact of negative interpersonal experiences on life satisfaction and self-evaluations is greater than the impact of positive interpersonal experiences. For example, Baumeister and Leary (1995) proposed that the need to belong is present in all people and cultures, at least to some degree. Although these authors acknowledged that both positive and negative emotions are influenced by belongingness, they argued that people are motivated most strongly to avoid the punishing consequences of social exclusion:

people should strive to achieve a certain minimum quantity and quality of social contacts but . . . once this level

is surpassed, the motivation should diminish. . . . Ideally, these interactions [with other people] would be positive or pleasant, but it is mainly important that the majority be free from conflict and negative affect. (p. 500)

Consistent with this idea, Leary et al. (1995) discovered an asymmetry with respect to the impact of belonging on self-esteem: Exclusion from a social group reduced self-esteem but inclusion did not increase it. The authors noted that “although receiving positive reactions may be mildly pleasant, negative reactions carry far more weight. . . . Specifically, our psychological systems are designed to detect and place greater emphasis on reactions that connote exclusion than reactions that connote inclusion” (p. 528).

A parallel asymmetry between positive and negative experiences is apparent in research on social relationships. Bad interpersonal interactions are more damaging to self-esteem than good interactions are uplifting. Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, and Vohs (2001) reviewed the scientific literature on close relationships. They concluded that “close relationships are more deeply and conclusively affected by destructive actions than by constructive ones. . . . Even outside of close relationships, unfriendly or conflictual interactions are seen as stronger and have bigger effects than friendly, harmonious ones” (p. 355). Similarly, Rook (1984) examined well-being in older women. She discovered that “negative social interactions have more potent effects on well-being than positive social interactions” (p. 1106).

Given the ubiquitous human need for belonging and the destructive consequences of failed social relationships, the consistent representation of interpersonal themes in negative self-esteem memories is understandable. Achievement failures are no doubt painful and injurious to self-esteem, but avoiding the punishing emotional consequences of social disharmony appears to assume a higher position in many people’s goal hierarchies.

Positive self-esteem memories were far more likely than negative memories to portray achievement themes. The strong presence of positive mastery themes is consistent with the idea that the pursuit of competence or achievement is a basic human motive (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Elliot, McGregor, & Thrash, 2002; McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, & Lowell, 1953; White, 1959). Elliot et al. (2002) described a fundamental “need for competence,” which has a “powerful and widespread influence on personality functioning and well-being” (p. 373). Achievement successes elevate positive self-esteem: “Competence may become a means to the end of feeling good about the global self,” experienced as a “joyful pride in accomplishment” (p. 374).

Participants in our studies were predominantly White, middle-class college students or college graduates living in

the United States. As such, they have inhabited worlds in which personal achievement is emphasized and rewarded, beginning in early childhood and intensifying thereafter. In the United States, “the political commitment to egalitarianism has made individual accomplishment an urgently felt imperative” (Kagan & Snidman, 2005, p. 15). Cross-cultural studies support “a view of U.S. culture as one that emphasizes individual achievement and the importance of recognizing and rewarding success” (Nelson & Shavitt, 2002, p. 454). The push for individual achievement is not as prevalent in many other world cultures (Nelson & Shavitt, 2002).

Taken together, research in social and personality psychology is consistent with the thematic differences between positive and negative self-esteem memories identified in the present studies. Intensely negative self-evaluations frequently are elicited by interpersonal conflict, disappointment, or injury, and the corresponding memories serve as emblematic markers of situations to be avoided. Intensely positive self-evaluations frequently are elicited by experiences of personal achievement and mastery, and the corresponding memories represent goals to be pursued.

We suggest several new directions for research using self-esteem memories. Although our memory probes targeted several different age intervals, it is unclear whether the consistent pattern of findings will hold for other life periods. For example, the decade following college graduation offers not only continued opportunities for achievement success but also marks the occasion of major interpersonal milestones—including getting married and having children. Later in life, lofty achievement aspirations may fade as retirement beckons. The balance of achievement and interpersonal themes in positive self-esteem memories may shift accordingly. Studies including children and adults at various points in the life span are necessary to test the generality of the present findings.

Comparative analyses involving different socioeconomic and cultural groups also are needed. Positive self-esteem memories focusing on the attainment of conventional achievement goals may be less prevalent for individuals growing up in families and communities with different beliefs, value systems, and opportunities for personal success. Studies of positive and negative self-esteem memories involving underprivileged populations in the United States or in countries that emphasize interdependence rather than independence (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989) could reveal a different pattern of achievement and interpersonal themes in self-esteem memories.

Although the specific content of positive and negative self-esteem memories may vary across diverse groups of participants, our expectation is that avoiding

interpersonal distress and pursuing some manifestation of achievement success are basic human motives and that they will be represented prominently in memories provided by diverse age, income, and cultural groups.

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