

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Tangible pasts: Memory practices among children and adolescents in Germany, an affect-theoretical approach

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Abstract

This article highlights the ontogeny of autobiographical memory and its sociocultural foundations as an important and underrepresented field of research in psychological anthropology. It discusses the results of an explorative photovoice study on the emotional experiences of children and adolescents. Our study discovered that memory practices play a major role in young people's daily lives. Participants often referred to emotionally significant past events, relationships, or life periods by relating them to particular memory objects. We assume that the material dimension of children's memory practices not only facilitates an affective engagement with the past but also makes past experiences communicable to oneself and to others. The memory objects used by our research participants were linked in substantial ways to culturally specific modes of remembering, (auto)biographical narration, and the *formation of feeling* among adolescents. In discussing broader implications of our results, we draw on insights from developmental psychology, affect and emotion theory, and social anthropological research on memory and materiality. We conclude with a brief comparative look at memory practices in the Indonesian context to hint at a significant field of cross-cultural research that opens at the intersection of studies on material culture, memory practices, (auto)biographical remembering and narrating, and the formation of feeling.

KEYWORDS

autobiographical memory, formation of feeling, Germany, Indonesia, memory objects, photovoice method, remembering, socialization

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INTRODUCTION

“Take photos of people, places, or things that play an important role in your life and that trigger negative, positive, or mixed feelings in you.” This was the task with which we approached students attending all grades (i.e., children aged 9–17 years) in a Berlin upper secondary school (*Gymnasium*). Our aim was to gain insight into the *formation of feeling* (*Gefühlsbildung*) processes in young people. We use the formation of feeling as a *sensitizing concept* as both forms of explicit upbringing and influencing and as implicit processes of shaping feelings that arise in everyday social interactions and behavioral routines. Both dimensions of the formation of feeling depend on the sociopolitical structures and the value and norm settings of a social or cultural group (Röttger-Rössler, 2019).

An initial thematic analysis of the data material showed that certain affective dimensions were articulated particularly frequently in the students’ *feeling images*: attachment to pets, the role of stuffed toy animals (as childhood companions), and the importance of friendships and hobbies. To our surprise, memory became another prominent theme in our study. Indeed, 54 percent of participating students described past experiences or dealt with themes of transience in their *emotional pictures*. Schoolchildren photographed objects that they used as prompts to remember autobiographical episodes, significant relationships, and particular periods of their lives.

We focus on memory practices with the acknowledgment that our initial aim was not to gain insight into the development of autobiographical memory among adolescents or the role that objects played within this process. Initially, we approached schoolchildren to discuss their present emotional experiences, so the prominence of remembering and processing the past came as a surprise; we address this in the article. We first present the study design and methodology and link our research with corresponding scholarship. We then describe the main characteristics of memory objects and analyze the different dimensions of remembering that the young people in our study addressed through their use of objects. We further discuss these objects as items that play a role within the socialization and ontogeny of autobiographical memory in children and adolescents. We conclude by situating our study within broader research on (auto)biographical memory in Indonesia, where Birgitt Röttger-Rössler conducted long-term fieldwork.

Our article is a preliminary exploration of a topic that has been neglected in psychological anthropology: the socialization of autobiographical remembering as affective practice that relates individuals to their social environments in socially and culturally distinct ways. We contend that the material dimension of memory practices discussed here plays a significant role.

STUDY AND METHOD

Before beginning our study, we held extensive discussions with the school’s student, teacher, and parent representatives. We then explained our project to individual classes, inviting schoolchildren to fill out a sign-up sheet if they were interested in participating.¹ We gave small digital cameras to students who consented to participate in our study. We asked them to depict their feelings by taking a photograph of something or someone evoking an emotion in them in any given situation.² We emphasized that the message of the photograph was more important to us than whether it was staged, depicted real people and things, or was taken during an “authentic” moment. We invited individuals to take as many photographs as they wished but asked them to select 15 photographs that they considered most important and which would become the basis for our subsequent interview. We asked participants to complete this assignment within two weeks. We further asked the students to use keywords to describe their choices in an accompanying research form. This written feedback proved extremely valuable as we conducted and analyzed our interviews, because it initially provided insight into how students verbalized their emotional experience in the moment, and then allowed them to reflect on their feelings several weeks later, at the time of the interview. Following each interview—which lasted an average of 30 minutes and which we conducted one-on-one with students inside their classrooms—we gave students the photographs they took, as well as audio recordings of our conversations as digital files on a USB stick.³

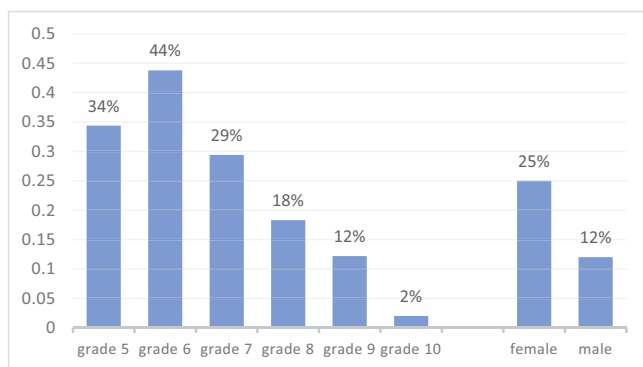


FIGURE 1 Student participation categorized according to grade level and gender. (Graphic by Röttger-Rössler, Seise) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

Sample

Initially, 163 participants (119 girls and 44 boys) signed up to participate. Of these, 69 girls (68 percent of the respondents) and 19 boys (or 43 percent of the respondents)—all aged 10 to 18 years—participated in the research. Participation was open to any of the 1171 children at the school, so it is productive to describe demographic parameters that may have made it more or less likely for students to be open to reflecting on and communicating their feelings. Figure 1 categorizes participation according to grade level and gender, information gathered from questions posed in the questionnaire.

Almost half of our participants were sixth graders (ages 11–12). This group showed the most enthusiasm during our initial presentation of the project. When asked whether anybody from the class wished to participate in our study, almost all of them immediately raised their hands. However, reactions from younger and older students were much more reserved. We attribute this to differing reasons: younger grades (Grade 5) seemed rather shy and overwhelmed by the question, whereas older grades expressed either boredom or skepticism about a project administered by “adults.” When asked whether they wished to offer their input, most of the older grades reacted with caution and hesitancy. Most students looked around the classroom to gauge the receptiveness to the idea based on the visible behavior of their peers before speaking.

We believe that the high participation rate among sixth graders is because interest in thinking about oneself and one’s feelings begins or increases around this age (11 years old) but is not yet fully formed by social *feeling rules* (Hochschild, 1983). This is especially true in the social context of school, which shapes the behavior of older students for a longer period. These feeling rules presuppose that any project that a teacher or adult figure proposes must be met with skepticism, while enthusiasm or interest is considered “nerdy.” These emotions are closely associated with “coolness” as an emotional self-staging style that esteems—especially for students who identify as male—a general masking of feelings, and a demonstrative lack of affect (Wellgraf, 2018, 117–18).

Such emotional skepticism, or “coolness,” is also reflected in a gender imbalance in the study: while one-quarter (25 percent) of all female students registered, only one-eighth of all male students did (12 percent). We also observed an asymmetry between grades: with the exception of the sixth grade, where boys and girls participated in equal proportions, gender imbalance increased with increase in grade levels. This may be because reflecting on one’s own feelings is more in line with female role models that female students at the school attempt to emulate.

Forty-one percent of female students told us that among some of the specific reasons for participation (feelings, photography, research, or other), the opportunity to reflect on feelings was crucial for them, whereas only 21 percent of male students noted this to be their main reason for participation. For other reasons, the distribution was reversed.

The school reflects the heterogeneity of the East Berlin district in which it is located. It is strongly influenced by migrations from Vietnam, Russia, and Eastern Europe, locations that are closely connected to

German history. According to information provided by the school, roughly 74 percent of students' parents were born in Germany, 15 percent were born in Vietnam, and 11 percent were born in other countries, with the main one being Russia.⁴ We cannot make deductions about the possible influence of parental homes—which are socially, politically, and religiously diverse—on children's memory practices, nor was this our goal. Our main aim was to find a methodical approach to the emotional worlds of adolescents.⁵ In this sense, our sample is comparable to the

ethnography of a street which, in the context of the heterogeneity of contemporary London, forces the researcher into encounters with people who would never fit pre-given categorizations of identity or social descriptors used to delineate particular populations for study. Yet, as this article demonstrates, it remains possible to construct generalized models around particular topics of inquiry, while recognizing that these may manifest themselves in various ways depending upon cultural trajectories. (Miller and Parrot, 2009, 516)

MEMORY, OBJECTS, EMOTIONS, AND AFFECTS

Social and cultural anthropology offers a rich disciplinary tradition from which researchers have examined cultural and collective memory, as well as the political dimension of remembering past events. Material culture—or the “objectification” of the past in the form of monuments, memorials, museums, texts, and art pieces, together with their construction and destruction—plays an important role in disciplinary debates (Connerton, 2006). Furthermore, numerous anthropological studies use personal memory objects to examine the intersections of material culture and memory. In so doing, the research focuses on transitional moments and experiences of disruption as they happen, that is, in the context of migration, implicating the loss of significant others or of familiar environments (Hallam and Hockey, 2001; Harrington-Watt, 2014; Marcoux, 2001; Marschall, 2019; Miller and Parrot, 2009; Parrot, 2010, 2012; Svašek, 2012). Albeit indirectly, these studies treat memory and emotion relationally, conceiving of individual and collective remembering as affective processes.

We also find useful the branch of social anthropology that deals with narrative representations of life trajectories, that is, forms of (auto)biographical narration and their respective sociocultural foundations (Angrosino, 1989; Langness and Frank, 1981; Peacock and Holland, 1993; Stewart and Strathern, 2000). Many of these studies focus on adults, examining their (narrative) handling of biographical turning points. Social anthropology has largely neglected to examine how children or adolescents deal with the past and learn to remember. In short, the formation of autobiographical memory in childhood is an underrepresented field in social anthropology. We find a cross-disciplinary perspective to be especially fruitful to address these lacunae.

Both developmental psychology and interdisciplinary memory research have focused on remembering and the memory behavior of children. The question of the age at which humans begin to acquire various forms of remembering, including autobiographical memory, is central in this research (Markowitsch and Welzer, 2006; Siegel, 2006).⁶ In this context, the relation between memory and language has been and remains of utmost importance. Numerous studies on the development of auto-noetic consciousness show that autobiographical memory—which relates experiences to a continuous self and which allows mental time travel between yesterday, today, and tomorrow—begins to form only in late childhood, after the age of six (Habermas and Reese, 2015; Markowitsch and Welzer, 2006, 229). Social memory practices such as *memory talks* between parents and children significantly influence autobiographical memory (e.g., Miller, Chen, and Olivarez, 2014; Nelson, 2003, 2006; Reese, 2002). Cultural differences in memory talks are also receiving increased attention (e.g., Fivush and Nelson, 2004; Q. Wang, 2006, 2013). Following this line of inquiry, researchers began to examine the role of emotions in memory practices in more detail, focusing especially on how these are framed by and in interaction with important social others (Quas and Fivush, 2009). Overall, a strong language-centered orientation dominates these studies. Tilmann Habermas (Habermas, 1999; Habermas and Paha, 2001) is one of the few psychologists who has addressed the role of objects within the formation of autobiographical memory and narrative among adolescents.

(Neuro)psychological research on memory focuses a great deal on the interaction between memory and emotion, and particularly on questions about whether emotion enhances memory and, if so, how these processes are evoked and what brain areas are involved.⁷ However, these studies use the terms *emotion* and *affect* interchangeably, failing to define them or to delineate between them. The same applies to social anthropological research, where *emotion* and *affect* are largely treated as synonyms, although the term *emotion* is used more frequently. It is only recently that a differentiated use of this terminology has emerged due to the influence of affect studies in literary studies and the humanities (Navaro-Yashin, 2009, 2012).

We define *affects* as bodily resonance phenomena, unfolding in human-to-human interactions and in human interactions with nonhuman beings and materialities. Unlike *emotions*, affects are not (yet) categorized, and thus cannot be directed toward discursively established channels. Since they cannot be expressed or acted out in specific ways, they broadly evade any reflective representation. This does not mean, however, that affects are not shaped by socialization and enculturation processes. Rather, they emerge in the shadow of such processes, that is, in the non-semanticized domains, in areas that are not (yet) structured by social and cultural conventions of meaning and expression (Röttger-Rössler, 2018, 241).

In contrast to affect, *feelings* are subjective bodily experiences of a specific affective relation, which arise when affective responses to one's surroundings attain a sufficient intensity for the perceiving individual to register them consciously. At this point, the individual is not yet able to specify, classify, or enact them as distinct emotions. Feelings can thus be conceived as mediators between precategorical affects and categorizable and conventionalized emotions.⁸ This mediation is important to the socialization of emotions, because it is mainly through processes of explicit *feeling formation* that individuals acquire emotional repertoires of their social group (Röttger-Rössler, 2019). We find it especially productive to differentiate between affects, feelings, and emotions when discussing the role that objects play in the socialization of memory practices, to which we will turn below.

MEMORY OBJECTS

In our study, students of all grade levels referred repeatedly to objects that they associate with memories of personally significant events, relationships, life phases, or life transitions. They photographed medals, trophies, and certificates; pictures of pets, (deceased) family members, and friends; vacation and class photos; tickets and fan cards; diaries and friendship books; souvenirs and postcards; stuffed toy animals; clothing; and various gifts. Students used objects to address three different dimensions of remembering: they evoked *episodic memories*—that is, they used specific objects to recall past events and experiences; they used objects to bring to mind significant *social others*; and they used objects that served as symbols for specific *life phases* or *life transitions*. In part, these three dimensions of remembering correlated with specific object categories, for example, when our interviewees referred to episodic memories by selecting corresponding objects, such as trophies, certificates, and medals or tickets, souvenirs, and vacation photos. First object categories (trophies, etc.) accentuated individual achievements, while second object categories (souvenirs, etc.) highlighted shared experiences. Portraits of people and pets, photo albums, and gift objects referred mainly to *significant (but absent) others*, demonstrating the need to maintain relationships. Stuffed toy animals in particular, but also clothing and books, figured as long-term companions at a moment in time considered closed (here, above all, childhood) or as witnesses to the transition between one life phase and another (i.e., in experiences of moving home, starting school, or in coming-of-age ceremonies).

Our data demonstrate that the use of memory objects across all three categories—episodic memories, social others, and life phases/life transitions—increases with age. We discovered that both girls and boys used episodic memories as the most salient category, followed by social others. In our study, girls used objects to recall memories more frequently than boys. Only one boy, aged 13, photographed the picture of his deceased cat that stood in for a significant social other. While these tendencies offer hints about the influence of age and gender in the use of memory objects and remembering, an unequal distribution of participants in our study inhibits the formulation of clear correlations.

Our study clearly demonstrates that memory objects are complex symbols that have the ability to evoke different, at times ambivalent, and always complex associations, emotions, and affects that may also change

over time. We attribute this to the fact that objects are not usually associated exclusively with a single memory or a significant other. It is more the case that objects are able to evoke multiple symbolic references that may become reinterpreted or perceived continuously, depending on the current life situation. Thus, these objects may constitute a *subjunctive mode* (Samuels, 2018; see also Shoheit, 2017) as they allow different interpretations of the past. As a result, emotions and affects that memory objects evoke can also be multifaceted. This became apparent when we began to analyze data and as we became aware of multiple discrepancies between the narratives we recorded in our interviews and the keywords gathered in accompanying research forms: the emotions schoolchildren recorded in the process of capturing their “feeling pictures” differed markedly from the statements they gave about their feelings during the interviews.⁹ The emotional meaning of a memory object is therefore variable: it is filtered continuously through the lens of the present. Therefore, even a (photo-based) conversation about emotions can be ephemeral and spontaneous; it needs to be understood as a kind of emotional snapshot.

Significantly, adolescents consciously assigned objects symbolic content. They were *supposed* to store the memory of a moment or a relationship, as well as the feelings associated with it. For example, one 13-year-old girl photographed a *Hühnergott*,¹⁰ an adder stone given to her by her cancer-stricken grandmother as a memento should she die. During our interview, the girl accentuated this quality of the object in its ability to remind her of her grandmother. Now that her grandmother is in remission, she explains, the stone makes her feel more cheerful, because the illness has been overcome. Another participant, a 12-year-old girl, photographed a Hello Kitty cushion. She explained to us that she used to like Hello Kitty and had owned several such items. However, she considered the specific cushion to be her favorite, and it was the only one she still valued. It was a gift from her stepfather’s late sister, who meant a lot to her and with whom she had regular contact. She stated that she remembered her “with the cushion” and that she was glad to have it. Where the stone was given as a memento with which to remember an ailing grandparent in case of death, the cushion was likely assigned a similar memory function only after the death of a stepparent. Thus, the result was a change in the attribution of meaning, as well as an increase in sentimental value (Marshall, 2019, 262). In our study, gifts functioned repeatedly as memory objects for social others. From a psychological perspective, they symbolize the person giving the gift because they once belonged to that person. Torn-off tickets and invitations, postcards, collected shells, letters, and pieces of clothing can be similarly understood within a part-whole relationship (Habermas, 1999, 195). Their materiality makes them a part of the past as an authentic trace across time. Therefore, these objects bear witness to what was experienced. Our interlocutors consciously saved such objects to remember, but they did not always acquire them consciously (in contrast to souvenirs, friendship bracelets, trophies, gifts, etc.). Stuffed toys that have accompanied many of our interviewees since their earliest childhood can be classified in a similar way.

In our study, memories were shown to be “deposited” in objects that brought the past to mind; they were able to create an affective continuum with a significant other or a significant experience/time, now inaccessible to participants. *Conscious* and *active* recourse to objects was used to bridge temporal and spatial distances or both between a social other, an event, or a completed life phase (Habermas, 1999, 284–85). This bridging function makes objects significant to their owners. Young people engage and relate affectively with their past by purposefully storing and placing these objects in everyday spatial environments, turning material items into highly meaningful autobiographical objects. Frequent reference to different memory objects in our study on the feeling worlds of the young suggests that past experiences play a central role in their self-image and emotional, as well as affective, experiences.

DIMENSIONS OF REMEMBERING

We find it useful to delve deeper into the three dimensions of remembering that we discussed earlier—retrospective forms oriented toward episodic experiences, social relationships, and life phases—this time, addressing their significance for the individual.

Episodic memories

One 13-year-old interviewee took various photos of souvenirs—mostly models of landmarks—that he brought back from vacations with his parents and grandparents. During these vacations, his family encouraged him to buy a souvenir—to *bring to mind* something from the past. He described being joyful and happy during these vacations, and when he described vacation souvenirs, he shared that he felt “cheerful when I look at it.” This illustrates the capacity of objects to store positive emotions—by means of a window into the episode experienced, a mental journey through time—and to recall it when needed.

In the context of our study, objects that can and *should* influence their owners’ emotional state in this way refer predominantly to *episodic memories*.¹¹ As described earlier, corresponding artifacts may be souvenirs, torn-off entrance and concert stubs, or photos of vacations, excursions, and festivities. Significantly, the boy’s narrative points to another important aspect: exceptional situations that have a positive or intense affective content, and thus transcend everyday life, can be interpreted as life highlights or as biographical milestones.

Significant biographical milestones were marked by objects such as trophies, medals, and certificates. In corresponding narratives, students repeatedly described feeling pride—a positive feeling associated with achievement, increased self-confidence, and assurance that they possess special abilities or that they have proven themselves. These memory objects corresponding to a feeling of pride demonstrate individual uniqueness. From a psychological perspective, such emotions contribute to an affirmative self-image, and for this purpose, an object offers material reassurance, which, simultaneously, simplifies external representation. One participant (a 15-year-old girl) formulated this in relation to recognition she received upon winning a math competition:

It’s really cool when you get certificates, because you get confirmation from yourself that you’re good at the subject, even though the teachers might not think so... . Yes, there are also such nice memories with the tasks. And you just feel smart and not stupid.

Schoolchildren who represented comparable achievements often captured a large number of these objects in one photo. A collection of such objects indicates that they do not wish to highlight distinct moments of success (although they could name each episode) but that they value pride for its self-affirming effects as an emotion in and of itself. Our interlocutors named such objects most frequently across all the age groups we surveyed (of 135 pictures depicting a wide variety of memory objects, 25 pictures alone addressed self-pride). They appeared with striking frequency even among the youngest participants in the study (in Grades 5 and 6, we found that 6 out of 10 students who photographed souvenir objects referred to the emotion of pride on the basis of earned trophies or medals).

Remembered relationships

In many cases, objects came to symbolize absent significant others. Absence was explained by the death of a person or pet, by geographical distance, or by a change in the relationship to a person (“living apart” was often named here). Interviewees used objects to remember not only moments experienced with others but also the relationship itself. For example, a 14-year-old girl photographed her great-grandmother’s bereavement card, which acts as reassurance that the relationship with the deceased person is intact even after her death. The card confirms to the girl that her great-grandmother still holds a place in her heart. She is thus able to maintain a connection to her. The material presence of the object establishes a form of continuity with the past that allows the relationship to continue in the present (see also Habermas, 1999, 307; Miller and Parrot, 2009; Parrot, 2010; Svašek, 2007, 232). The girl placed the object in a central position in her room, on a pinboard above her desk, which gave her ample opportunity to return to the object to remember and reflect upon it often. Furthermore, it becomes clear that remembering goes hand in hand with a “calming down,” providing a brief pause from everyday life. Thus, the potential of an object to transcend everyday life—similar to vacation souvenirs—is also relevant here.

In the following excerpt, a 15-year-old student describes how she used a photo album to preserve the memory of a special friendship that had passed its peak:

Um, yes, old memories. Well, the photo album in the middle, the small one, is from my former best friend. We were very, very, very, very, very, very much together on our way through elementary school and went through so much together. Um, she's at [our] school now too, but we've grown apart, but we still get along well. But I think that with [the photo album] ... every time I make myself aware again of what a good friend I had or still have. And yes, that it just stays in my memory.

Here, it is not about maintaining the relationship, as was the case in the previous example; rather, the significance of the object is about making sure that she does not forget the strength of the friendship after it has ended, making this experience retrievable. Both narratives provide insight into how children draw on their material environments to anchor the memory of relationships with significant others over time or to make them retrievable. These narratives also illustrate that the social embedding of individuals and the meaning of their interpersonal relationships appear in a temporal continuum that transcends the present. Both current and past interpersonal relationships are significant components of a person's social embeddedness, recalled in everyday life through memory objects. Daniel Miller and Fiona Parrot (2009) describe a similar instance when discussing the way the residents of a London street use objects to negotiate the loss of significant social relations: "In various ways objects may represent, replace, or replicate both the person lost and indeed loss itself" (510–11).¹²

Remembered life phases

This is my teddy bear... . It might even be looking a bit frayed now. That's simply because I got the teddy bear when I was born... . And, for me, it symbolizes a little bit ... my life, ... an imaginary friend, who actually accompanies me all the time ... At night, he mostly always lies or sits by my bed or so... . Yes, then you also remember a little bit about things that have nothing to do with the teddy now, but have happened in life, because you see the teddy and think, perhaps, he's been together with me for so long.

This student (a 14-year-old boy) attributes to his teddy bear the social role of a friend and companion—one whose signs of wear and tear are the result of its prolonged presence in his life. It both symbolizes and testifies to the boy's life itself. The object also reminds him of individual life episodes. From a psychological perspective, objects that symbolize entire life phases as (constant) companions help people establish a sense of their own continuity over time.

According to Habermas (1999), "The souvenir brings the past into the present and makes it sensually tangible. With its help, the person sensually assures herself, in an almost deceptive way, of her current version of her continuity with herself" (302; our translation). Such objects can be read as leitmotifs that can be experienced sensorially, making it easier for the individual to perceive and narrate their own life course as a coherent, linear development (compare with Hoskins, 1998).¹³

In our study, memory objects also marked transitions and life-changing experiences.¹⁴ Habermas (1999, 479) points out that transitional objects also help maintain a sense of continuity with the self: they refer to a person's past and to significant absent others and places. They may also replace absent interaction partners.¹⁵ This aspect can be illustrated by an excerpt from an interview with a 13-year-old student who photographed a framed group photo taken during her kindergarten years:

Because it reminds me very often, because we have moved. It also made me think a lot about my friends in kindergarten, some whom I know are at another elementary school. Some are

also here [at my current school]... I find it simply sad that I don't see them again now, because I don't know where they are. And yeah, when we said goodbye, we all cried too.

In this narrative, the recollection of relations with a former group of kindergarten-aged children and dissolution owing to changing schools clearly shows the importance of a social-relational embeddedness. It is astonishing that even though kindergarten was already some years ago for this participant, the experience of this caesura remains emotionally salient. The group photo is framed and hangs in her room. Such a transitional object can be interpreted as a materialized biographical milestone, which forms part of a life story characterized by linearity and continuity.

Given our study of young people's feeling formation, we argue that the use of memory objects enables individuals to adopt a specific affective reference to their past and to transience, and that this is of great importance for their everyday emotional experience, their social embeddedness, their current self-concept, and the development of their personalities. Meanwhile, we show that these affective references are prevalent as shared socially and culturally anchored practices that embed the individual in overarching contexts of meaning. This aspect draws attention to the ontogeny of autobiographical memory and its sociocultural foundations.

SOCIALIZATION AND ONTOGENY OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MEMORY

In conversation with interviewees, we discovered that memory objects are largely mediated by the social and family environments. One 13-year-old schoolgirl thematized the loss of her late grandfather using various photos of objects. In one photograph, she captured a dried-up bouquet of roses, which was the last remaining object she had from her grandfather. When her mother threw this bouquet away, the girl described feeling initially upset. To replace the loss, her mother gave her a framed photo of her grandfather, which reconciled her. One memory object was thus replaced by another, which seemed more adequate to the mother, and the girl accepted this object exchange following a brief period of reflection. The student's mother did not question the practice of remembering using a specific object but only the object category itself. Another student, 15 years old, captured a series of photos of the deceased family dog that were displayed in the family living room. Another 14-year-old participant captured a photo board of vacation pictures mounted in the hallway, in front of which she describes stopping to recollect pleasant memories. Recall a family tradition—discussed earlier—of buying souvenirs with parents or grandparents, which several children reported to us. Thus, explicit explanations and how objects are used to represent and remember past experiences and significant others in the social (in this case, family) environment play a significant role in determining young people's memory practices. Because so many of the photographed objects in our study were so similar, we suggest that the memory function that artifacts acquire is, at least partially, socially predefined.¹⁶ However, the emotional memory content of the objects—that is, the affects and emotions they (should) evoke in their owners—is usually not readily available to outsiders; rather, this remains legible and accessible to the participants themselves, and to insiders.

Studies by developmental psychologist Katherine Nelson (2006) show that early childhood conversations with parents (these *memory talks*) shape how participants report their own memories, decisively impacting autobiographical memory. Memory talks initially sensitize participants to a familiarity with narrative structures (*how* something is told), help convey the prevailing understanding of time, and raise awareness of one's own experience. According to this approach, autobiographical remembering is the result of *shared memory practices* that are conveyed during socialization: *what* is to be remembered, *how* it is remembered, and *from which point onward*, depends on the respective cultural meaning systems and is learned in social interactions. Conversely, memory practices enable insight into social and cultural norms, notions of time and personhood, and ideals regarding self-image, life course, social relationships, narrative, and emotions (Nelson, 2006, 87).

We assume that, in a comparable way, the use of memory objects described in this article can also be read as a shared practice of materially supported communication of experiences that is passed on and shaped during socialization and which fundamentally shapes the autobiographical memory of the individual.

As previously discussed, Habermas worked extensively on the formation of autobiographical memory and narrative among adolescents and is one of the few psychologists to also address the meaning of objects in this context (Habermas, 1999; Habermas and Paha, 2001). He starts from the assumption that it is only in middle (ca. 15–17 years) to later adolescence (ca. 18–21 years) that people begin to “think about how someone becomes who one is, that is, to self-reflexively construct one’s own life story” (1999, 312; our translation). He concludes that memory objects also begin to appear in mid- to late adolescence: “Because it is only from adolescence onward that an extended perspective on one’s own past and future can be taken, adolescence constitutes a threshold for the use of such memory objects that refer to the biographical past or future” (Habermas, 1999, 313; our translation).

A greater degree of self-reflection and an increasing preoccupation with oneself from the beginning of adolescence onward offers a possible explanation for why young people in our study came to *increasingly* refer to their past with the help of objects when asked about things, people, and places that evoke emotions in them. Strikingly, memory objects had already begun to appear in photos and subsequent narratives among participating children as young as 10 and 11 years old. On the other hand, among the respondents who were in the ninth grade (roughly corresponding to 14-year-olds), 78 percent referred to their past with the help of photos of objects, and 42 percent used objects as early as Grade 5 (roughly aged 10 years).

The use of memory objects cannot be reduced to conscious processes of identity formation during adolescence. Rather, our study suggests that materially supported memory practices described here are part of a culturally anchored system of meaning that places a high value on autobiographical remembering and narration that children observe, imitate, and learn in their social environment from an early age. In the course of their socialization, children and adolescents acquire a specific way of dealing with time, with the past, and with transience: they acquire an understanding of how they can and should position themselves emotionally and affectively in relation to their past experiences and relationships; what and who they should remember; and how (by means of which objects). Such culturally and socially anchored memory practices emphasize individuality and uniqueness of life trajectories and assign a high status to autobiographical self-reflection and narration.¹⁷ It is likely that memory objects, which serve as biographical milestones, make it easier for individuals to form an autobiographical memory and to orient themselves in terms of the ideal of a linear, coherent life story.

Foregrounding these experiences using affect theory, we assume that haptic properties of objects—their ability to make the past tangible and graspable and, thus, perceptible to the senses in the present—enable an affective engagement with the past. Given their materiality, memory objects may facilitate the verbalization and communication of significant affective experiences. These objects can thus bridge the gap towards the more culturally categorized domain of emotions. The transfer and acquisition of object-related memory practices described in this article thus become interpretable as a form of feeling formation and emotion socialization (Röttger-Rössler, 2019), during which children and adolescents are taught a specific cultural script regarding the past and transience. This transmits and consolidates norms, values, and conceptions of time, life course, and life phases, as well as the experiences of the self and interpersonal relations shared in the adolescents’ respective social-cultural environments. The material component of autobiographical memory protects *facultatively* externalized memories of significant experiences and relationships from being forgotten. The use of objects makes memory both sensually experienceable and communicable not only for the actors themselves but also for their environment. It is precisely through their materiality and their positioning in the everyday living spaces of the young that they form significant elements of social and temporal-spatial self-embedding.¹⁸ In other words, autobiographical memory objects can be understood as constituting *affective arrangements* (Slaby, 2019) that relate individuals to their past experiences. The objects form affective rather than emotional arrangements because they are capable of evoking different emotions depending on the particular present, as evidenced in our examples. We did not intend to analyze our data with the express objective of uncovering social or cultural differences in the memory practices of children and adolescents—in fact, our small sample would not have allowed it. Rather, our goal was to gain insight

into adolescents' affective and emotional memory practices. Nevertheless, the influence of sociocultural factors signals further investigation, especially in the field of psychological anthropology, which is why we conclude with a brief comparative outlook.

CONCLUSION

Studies in social and cultural anthropology, literary studies, and cultural psychology point to numerous cultural contexts in which it is uncommon to hear autobiographical narratives where an individual narrates their own life self-reflectively in chronological form as a coherent story of their own personality development (see Hoskins, 1998; Keesing, 1985; Rodgers, 1995; Rosaldo, 1976; Röttger-Rössler, 1993; G. Wang, 1976; Q. Wang, 2013). They view this narrative genre as a historical product of Western societies that emerged from Christian traditions of self-exploration and self-confession (e.g., Gusdorf, 1980). Various studies investigating life-history narration in Asian contexts contend that these narratives do not center the individual accentuating their uniqueness but elevate their role within a socio-centered narrative as part of a collective identity that has little or no place for self-referential introspection. In these cultural contexts, life histories are narrated biographically rather than autobiographically (Bauer, 1990; Hoskins, 1998; Röttger-Rössler, 1993, 2000; Samuels, 2018; Shohet, 2021; Q. Wang, 2013).¹⁹ Correspondingly, neither the learning of autobiographical narrative conventions nor the purposeful collection and storage of personal memory objects has been elaborated on in these cultural contexts.

Among the Makassar on the Indonesian island Sulawesi, where Röttger-Rössler did long-term fieldwork, autobiographical narrations were (and still are) completely unusual. Like the Kodi on the Indonesian island Sumba, whom Janet Hoskins (1998) describes as “tongue-tied when asked to describe themselves,” (2) Makassar individuals become taciturn, turning away when asked to talk about their lives. This was true even for individuals with whom the researcher established strong, long-term rapport (Röttger-Rössler, 1983, 2000). As the research progressed, it became apparent that a form of *biographical* storytelling was widespread in Makassar society—individual life stories were always collectively interpreted and recounted by others, often in the company of the protagonists of the life story.

Similarly, in the course of her fieldwork, Hoskins (1998) found that people were more talkative when they began to discuss personal possessions. Thus, she was able to note complex life stories that were indirectly told to her using the biography of certain objects. Narratives were mainly told about domestic objects, “ordinary household possessions,” (2) like betel bags, clothes, drums, and bottles, which were interwoven with everyday lives of their owners in a way that enabled them to narrate aspects of their own lives using the histories of the objects—but, as Hoskins emphasizes, always from a distanced, less introspective position. Hoskins thus refers to these objects, which function as material witnesses to life histories, as *biographical objects*. These objects function as central symbols for the lives they represent and can even be considered “surrogate selves” (Hoskins, 1998, 9). According to the author, objects and the meanings they convey play a central role in the construction of history, the constitution of gender, modes of exchange, and of social group formation in Kodi society. In this context, she also refers to the importance of *history objects*, sacred heirlooms that are socially meaningful because they integrate ancestral material legacies. Heirlooms also play a significant role in Makassar society, where they are also the focus of numerous collective rituals. However, despite the similarities, the researcher could not observe life-history narration along biographical objects in this local context. On the contrary, it is difficult to acquire and keep personal objects over a lifetime, owing to a moral obligation to pass on individual possessions as soon as someone asks for them. Accordingly, Röttger-Rössler was not able to observe a conscious mode of collecting, or keeping of material items as objects of *personal* memory.²⁰ On the whole, Makassar society does not attach a particular value to looking back and reflecting on an individual's past.²¹ In other words, in this society, autobiographical remembering and narration do not constitute a cultural practice. Instead, actors emphasize collective memories, for example, in narratives about ancestors or in their retelling of local historical events. Correspondingly, memory objects also refer to collective memory, contents that are significant for the community such as the remembrance of common ancestors.

However, in certain contexts, individual-specific memorabilia may play an important role among the Makassar: for example, it is a widespread practice in South Sulawesi, as in other parts of Indonesia, to ask departing persons for a *tanda mata* (an eye sign), an everyday, personal object that will help those who stay behind to remember the absent person. Preferred *tanda mata* are items of clothing, which retain the body odor of the previous wearer—which points to the sensory potential of material objects to evoke memories. It would therefore be premature to deny the existence of self-referential, material-based memory practices in the local context. It may simply be that these practices play a much smaller role in the cultural context, overlaid by collective memory practices that orient individuals toward their respective communities and local histories, positioning them as links in a chain that converge the past and the future.

This brief comparative perspective on memory practices in the Indonesian context raises questions about differences among social and cultural memory practices. For example, to what extent, and in which ways, does the different weight assigned to self-referential life-history remembering and narrating across diverse cultural contexts influence the formation of autobiographical memory? This question is particularly relevant when considering the formation of affective relations to the past and to the experience of transience—no matter the kind—as an important developmental step in the formation of feeling among adolescents. Other important questions raised by this analysis are as follows: How is remembering learned? How do affective and emotional references to the past develop? What role do distinct cultural practices and material artifacts play in these processes?

Further comparative cultural research that combines psychological and social anthropological approaches will help determine what diverse cultural attitudes concerning the individual's past and related practices mean for the formation of autobiographical memory. We see tremendous promise in future interdisciplinary research on the interaction between material culture, memory, (auto)biographical remembering, narrating, emotion socialization, and processes of feeling formation.

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ENDNOTES

¹We asked parents of underage schoolchildren to complete an informed consent form, granting their children permission to participate in our study. However, it was up to the children to ask their parents to sign these permission forms.

²For further methodological reflection on photovoice, see Röttger-Rössler, Scheidecker, and Lam (2019).

³At the request of schoolchildren and parents, all interviews were conducted at the school. Interviews were conducted by seven people who had an impact on the interview situation based on their own position, as well as their personal interview methods. In addition to the two authors of this paper, these were the members of the CRC 1171 research project, “The Formation of Feeling in Vietnamese Berlin” and included Gabriel Scheidecker, Anh Lam, and Tran Thu Trang, as well as Felix Freigang and Sarah Richter, who worked as student assistants.

⁴The proportions of these three groups in our final sample of actual participants differed slightly. While the proportion of German–German participants remained rather similar (74 percent–70 percent), German–Vietnamese participants became underrepresented (15 percent–10 percent), while schoolchildren with parents from Russia and other countries became overrepresented (11 percent–20 percent). Of the 45 schoolchildren who depicted memory objects in their feeling pictures, 32 had parents who were born in Germany, 9 had parents born in countries of the former Eastern Block, and 4 had parents who were born in Vietnam.

⁵We had already worked closely with the school where the study was conducted in the context of another project, so we believed that we could gain access for a productive study here. This ongoing project is titled “Formation of Feeling in Vietnamese Berlin” and is part of CRC 1171 “Affective Societies” hosted at Freie Universität Berlin and funded by the DFG.

⁶In this context, attention has focused on the reliability of memories (e.g., Brainerd, 2013; Howe, Cicchetti, and Toth, 2011), the phenomenon of infantile amnesia (e.g., Peterson, Warren, and Short, 2011), and memory strategies in different learning contexts (Fletcher and Bray, 1996; Labrell and Ubersfeld, 2004; Moely et al., 1992). For an overview, see also Schneider and Ornstein (2015).

⁷For a short overview see Levine and Pizarro (2004) and Philippot and Schaefer (2001).

- ⁸See also Thonhauser (2019), who points to this double role of feelings: “feeling emphasizes the experiential dimension involved in dynamics of affective resonance and in the enactment of emotion repertoire, an experiential dimension that implies self-involvement” (59).
- ⁹Methodologically, an accompanying research form represents a medium that may reveal different information from that disclosed to the interviewer.
- ¹⁰*Hühnergott* (chicken god) is used to describe adder stones (usually flint) with a hole, which can usually be found on the seashore. Such stones are believed to possess lucky or protective qualities, which is why they are often used as talismans.
- ¹¹For an overview of the agency that objects can exert, see Hoskins (2006).
- ¹²The authors’ remarks also become comparable to the domains of episodic memories and life stages or biographical transitions described in this article, especially because, from a material culture perspective, social relations are not limited to persons but can also refer to work, childhood, a place, sports, or aesthetic interests (Miller and Parrot, 2009, 513).
- ¹³The term *biographical objects* was employed by Janet Hoskins (1998), following her interpretation of French sociologist Violette Morin (1969), to describe objects used by individuals to indirectly tell stories of their lives in the Indonesian community she studied (Kodi, Sumba). Although the local society lacked an autobiographical narrative tradition, individuals embedded their life stories in the histories of significant everyday objects. See also Hoskins (2006).
- ¹⁴Such object narratives occurred infrequently. We think that one reason for this may be that our interviewees (aged 10 to 15) have not yet experienced dramatic transitional situations to any great extent.
- ¹⁵See also Habermas and Paha (2002) on the importance of objects in moments of biographical transition among medical students at the beginning of their studies.
- ¹⁶Compare with Habermas (1999): “The framework condition of any psychological meaning of personal objects must be their culturally given meaning. The individual can only select from the given universe of meaningful objects, and can individualize objects and their meaning only within this framework” (177; our translation).
- ¹⁷For example, Nelson (2003) also emphasizes that in Euro-American contexts, “everyone now must have a personal story to tell, beginning in preschool, and everyone’s story must emphasize his or her unique individuality” (133).
- ¹⁸According to Habermas and Reese (2015, 180), closely intertwined processes in the development of autobiographical remembering and the self during childhood form the prerequisite for the formation of the capacity for *autobiographical reasoning*. These processes begin in adolescence and represent a qualitatively different format of autoethic reference, central to identity formation. Autobiographical reasoning presupposes complex social-cognitive abilities that include, in addition to autobiographical memory, an understanding of calendrical time and knowledge of the cultural conception of biography (see also Habermas, 2007).
- ¹⁹Recent social anthropological studies about narrative worldmaking strategies among Indonesian (Samuels, 2018) and Vietnamese (Shohet, 2021) protagonists illustrate vividly the importance of subjunctive modes and sideshadowing strategies in personal narratives, which avoid drawing clear causal links between past events and present life circumstances but keep open multiple possibilities and perspectives and thus “hold on to open-ended pasts and futures” (Samuels 2018, 110). In other words, narrators avoid creating a single autobiographical truth that could jeopardize social relationships.
- ²⁰In a similar vein, Sabine Marschall (2019) shows that the use of keepsakes does not play a role in the cultural imagination of African migrants in South Africa. While material culture and migration literature may suggest the importance of keepsakes and mementos of home, Marschall’s conversation partners contradicted this claim: “No, no, no, we don’t have that kind of culture, taking things like that which remind us [of the] past, no, no, no” (259). After further inquiry and reflection, however, some respondents were able to name objects that experienced a change in meaning due to their migration experience. Nevertheless, such memory practices were claimed as not being part of their cultural norms.
- ²¹This is also mirrored in a small photovoice study conducted by Röttger-Rössler in 2014 with Makassar adolescents to gain insight into their lives and feeling worlds. Using the prompt “photograph what is important for your life,” a group of five boys and five girls (10 to 14 years old) were asked to portray their life worlds. None of the children referred explicitly to past experiences, or to personally significant others (absent or lost), and there was no evidence of the use of memory objects in the photographs by the young Makassar.

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