

EARLY MEMORIES AND SEX DIFFERENCES

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Following a lecture on Adlerian theory a class of Psychology I students were asked to record their earliest memory. Reports were received from 126 females and 100 males, and were analysed according to the major theme involved and according to five categories that related to emotional content. Thirty specific themes were found, but some categories which were infrequently used were combined where appropriate, giving a total of thirteen categories.

An analysis of the reports showed that males reported significantly more memories relating to "games and parties" and "accident to self", while females reported significantly more memories relating to "family interaction", "frightening experiences" and "sensual experiences", in that order. More males reported "pleasurable experiences", and the females scored higher on "neutral report", both at the .01 level of significance.

The importance of early experience and, therefore, an implicit emphasis on early memories, was stressed in all psycho-dynamic theories of human personality but Adler alone (Adler, 1929) specifically noted the importance of earliest memories as such. While not noting any sex differences per se, he argued that the content of the earliest memory was always related to the life-style of the individual. His great disciple, Hertha Orgler, noted that Adler defined the first childhood memories as one of the "three entrance gates to psychic life" and taught that the life-style "moulded the memories", and not vice versa (Orgler, 1939, pp. 39, 47-61).

Related to this initial thesis are contemporary theories and studies about early behaviour patterns and sex-typed behaviours. For example, considerable sex differences have been found among normal children in their choice of games (Sutton-Smith, Rosenberg and Morgan, 1963; Rosenberg and Sutton-Smith, 1964; Herron and Sutton-Smith, 1971; Fling and Manosevitz, 1972). Bates and Bentler (1973) have taken this a step further and considered play activities of "normal" and "effeminate" boys finding that so-called "effeminate" boys do in fact play more "feminine games" (according to the scale Sutton-Smith and his colleagues used) and continue them longer over the childhood span, than so-called "masculine" boys.

These findings in turn reflect the results found, for example, in Whiting and Edwards' (1973) cross-cultural study, over seven cultures, which found among 3-6 year olds that girls sought help more frequently than did boys, sought or offered physical contact more frequently, were slightly more sociable than boys, while boys were found to indulge in rough and tumble play more often.

Similarly, as Tyler (1965) and Kagan (1969) have noted, others (e.g. Terman and Tyler, 1954) have found that from kindergarten onwards boys engage in more active games calling for vigorous physical activity, whereas girls show more interest in passive or domestic activities; boys are more aggressive than girls in their behaviour (Bach, 1945; Muste and Sharpe, 1947; Maccoby and Wilson, 1957; Sears, 1951; Emmerich, 1959; Kagan and Lemkin, 1960; Bandura, Ross and Ross, 1961; Bandura, 1962), and that females demonstrate greater dependency, conformity and social passivity and demonstrate more nurturant behaviour and "greater preoccupation with people and harmonious interpersonal relationships" (Kagan, 1969, p. 77).

Although some of the sex differences in behaviours found in kindergarten or pre-school groups seem to reverse in somewhat older groups, though not in cultures such as the East-African tribes Nyansongo and Ngecha, nor in the Oyugi in Western Kenya where the boys are kept close to the home and engaged in domestic and child-minding chores (Whiting and Edwards, 1973), they would appear to throw some light on the type of very early experience which adults might be expected to recall.

METHOD

A class of Stage I Psychology students to whom a lecture on Adlerian theory was being given were extemporaneously invited to write down their earliest memory and hand it to the lecturer in order that some information might be obtained about the memories which appeared of foremost importance to this particular group.

One hundred and twenty six female and one hundred male students complied. Unfortunately not all gave the age at which they placed the particular experience which they recalled but, from a content analysis, the age range was inferred to extend from approximately eight or nine months (the child was said to have been crawling and not yet walking)—although one referred to an experience "when lying in its pram"—to five years of age (commencing school).

RESULTS

The reports were initially categorized according to (i) the emotions, if any, involved (pleasure/displeasure/anger/fear/neutral), and (ii) the specific major themes of the memories (some were quite complex, others very simple). This led to a list of 29 themes being compiled: Games or party; Fear of supernatural; Accident to self; Accident to self plus reprimand; Accident to self plus sympathy; Accident to others; Spilling things; Breaking toys; Novel experiences; Birth of siblings or cousin; Sickness of siblings or cousins; Rivalry of siblings or cousin; Domestic scene (e.g., sights and smells of kitchen); Travelling; Sensual/impression; Sickness (Own); Pre School; Wanting to go to school;

Holiday; Nightmare; Death, Interaction with family in toto; Interaction with parents/grandparents; Interaction with friends; Toilet accidents—with and without reprimand; Cognitive experience; Clothes; Bad news for other member of family.

As there were sometimes less than five cases in the categories mentioned, some of the categories were combined to give a total of 13 categories of experience: Games/party; Accident to self; Accident to others; Novel experience; Siblings etc.; Domestic scene; Sensual experience; Pre school; Holidays; Frightening experience; Sickness; Family interaction; Cognitive experience.

The distributions were tested by Chi Square to assess the significance of sex differences.

Sex differences for these 13 categories gave a Chi Square which was significant at .01 level. If all categories contributed equally to achieve such a level of significance each would reach a Chi Square of 2.017. It was decided, therefore, that any category which made a smaller contribution than this should be ignored. This left five categories important enough to be considered:

- (1) Games and parties—Chi Square = 12.29 (male higher than female).
- (2) Family interaction—Chi Square = 4.55 (female higher than male).
- (3) Frightening experiences—Chi Square = 2.08 (female higher than male).
- (4) Sensual experiences—Chi Square = 2.08 (female higher than male).
- (5) Accident to self—Chi Square = 2.05 (male higher than female).

For the five emotions, sex differences gave a total Chi Square which was significant at much better than the .01 level, but only two were high enough to be individually significant. These were "pleasure" and "neutral", with more boys reporting pleasurable experiences and more girls' reports coming into the "neutral" category, both at better than the .01 level.

DISCUSSION

As one might surmise in commonsense terms, the salience of any experience in early memory will probably depend upon the degree of emotionality involved or sensory input, and perhaps the degree of novelty. On the other hand, as Adler suggested, it may well be the "life-style" which is responsible for the recovery or shape of recollection of such memories. These are possibilities which have not been explored here.

But what has been demonstrated is that, as we might well have hypothesised from the games and other studies referred to earlier, there is a difference in the degree to which particular types of activities and emotional reactions are remembered by the sexes. Undoubtedly posi-

tively correlated with the liking for activity and the "rough and tumble games" (cf. Whiting and Edwards, 1973) found so often in the young male, is the fact that the majority of the subject group reported memories relating to games and parties. The "accidents to themselves" also reported might also well be hypothesised as likely to arise in a group which engages in most active and aggressive play.

The "greater dependency, conformity and social passivity and nurturance, responsibility and sociability" (Whiting and Edwards, 1973, p. 172), found so often in females, and Kagan's (1969) "greater pre-occupation with people . . ." (p. 77), are surely reflected in the females' higher recollection of memories in which family interaction is predominant, as well as in the memories of frightening experiences. The latter, too, of course are undoubtedly positively correlated with the findings of personality studies that females are more timid than males (e.g. Saville, 1972). The number of sensual or sensory memories reported by the girls would not however readily be hypothesised from a study of the literature, but would be well in line with popular expectation. I remember reading in my own earlier years that "women are sensual and men sexual", which latter description refers also to man's greater aggressiveness.

More detailed studies will, of course, be required to establish the actual correlations between earliest memories and adult life-style or personality patterns. It would also be interesting to see if the types of earliest memories are constant or differ across cultures. But, even from this small study, it can be seen that reports of earliest memories do seem to bear a positive relationship to common childhood behaviour patterns in the sexes, and may well be, if not a "gateway to the psyche" at least one means by which we can examine past experience in relation to present behaviour.

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