

Earliest memories of school-age children in Finland and Palestine

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Background

The idea that our earliest memories carry special personal significance or may reveal something about our personality has a long history in (clinical) psychology. However, others consider self-reported earliest memories as simply an example of early autobiographical memories selected for reporting based on current concerns.

Little previous research exists on the earliest memories of children, and none from the Middle East or the Nordic countries. Regarding cultural differences in earliest memories, one study found American children to report more individually oriented memories than Chinese children¹. Some studies also suggest adults in more individualistic cultures report more emotionally charged and individually oriented earliest memories^{2,3}, but results are mixed⁴.

As regards current mood, depressive mood has repeatedly been linked to 1) less specific autobiographical memories (a phenomenon dubbed Over-General Memory) and 2) mood-congruent, negatively-biased recall. It is unclear, however, whether such effects of depressive mood also apply to earliest memories in particular.

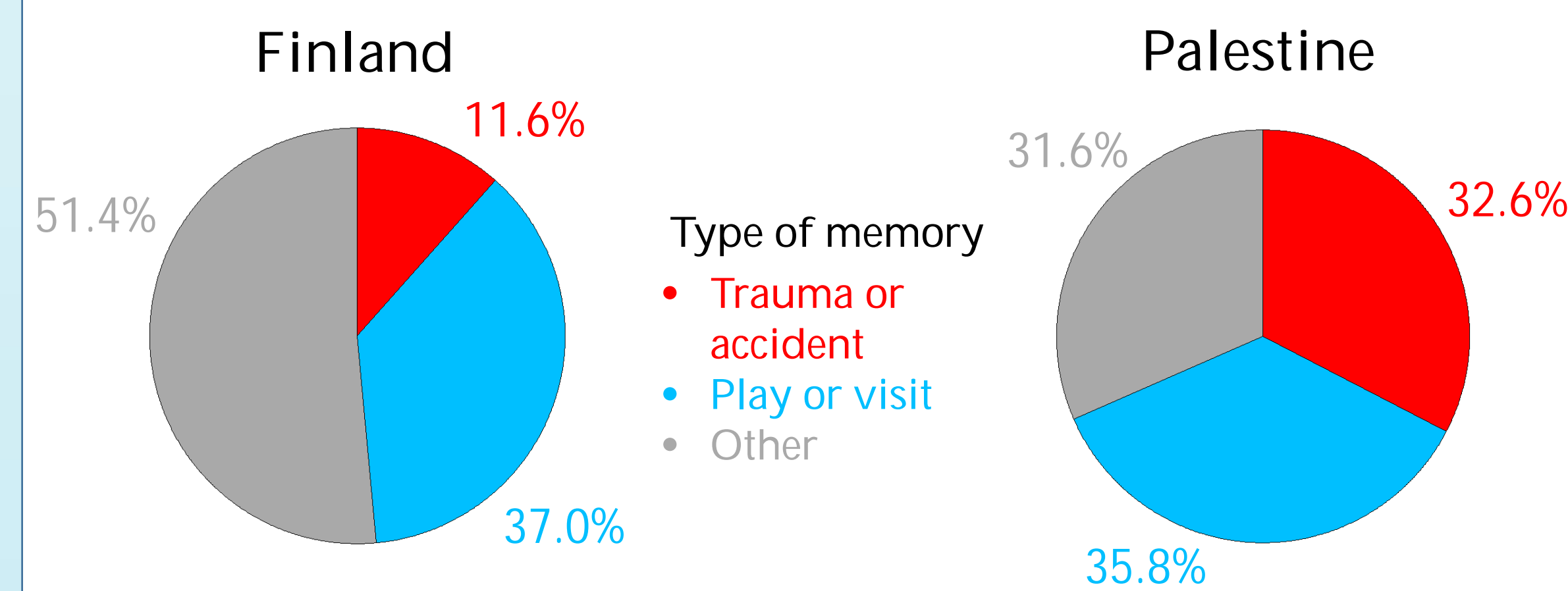
Method

- Samples of 188 Palestinian schoolchildren in 2010 and 184 Finnish schoolchildren in 2018 were assessed in their classrooms, using identical open questions about their earliest memory and the *Depression Self-Rating Scale for Children (DSRS)*
- A total of 286 children provided an earliest memory, and of them, 269 filled in the DSRS
- Memories were coded for specificity (specific vs. general), social orientation (individual vs. social), emotional valence (negative, neutral, or positive) and content categories
- Shares of specific, social, positive, and negative earliest memories in the two samples were compared with χ^2 tests
- Associations of gender and depressive symptoms with specificity, social orientation, and emotional valence of memories were studied using binary logistic regression in the aggregated sample

Research questions

- 1) What types of memories do Finnish and Palestinian school-age children report as their earliest?
- 2) Are there differences in the specificity, social orientation, or emotional valence of earliest memories between Finnish and Palestinian children?
- 3) Is depressive mood linked to features of earliest memories?

Results



Characteristic	Finland (n = 176)	Palestine (n = 110)	Difference $\chi^2(1)$
Specific memory %	76.1	60.0	7.63**
Social memory %	50.6	57.3	0.97
Positive memory %	9.1	19.1	5.15*
Negative memory %	14.2	27.3	6.63*

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

More depressive symptoms predicted more negatively valenced ($OR = 1.07, p = .02$) and less specific memories ($OR = .95, p = .02$).

Discussion

In both countries, children's self-reported earliest memories most typically concerned emotionally neutral, every-day events. Other major categories identified were memories of trauma or other accidents, and memories of play or visits and trips.

More Palestinian children reported emotionally charged memories. Long-lasting traumatizing conditions in Palestine were evident in the very large share of Palestinian children's earliest memories that related to trauma, war, or accidents, and a larger share of negatively charged memories.

Still, despite conditions of recurrent conflict and on-going hardship, Palestinian children also reported as many earliest memories relating to play or pleasant visits as children in Finland, and more memories with positive emotion. This may reflect cultural differences in emotional expression or compensatory efforts.

We detected no significant differences in the social orientation of earliest memories of Finnish and Palestinian children. We also found children in Palestine, generally thought to be a more collectivist culture, to report more emotionally charged memories, in contrast to some earlier findings among adults^{2,3}. Cultural individualism vs. collectivism appears insufficient to explain differences in qualities of earliest memories⁴. Cultural differences in parent-child interaction while reminiscing about past events may provide one explanation for differing findings⁵.

More depressive mood was linked to higher likelihood of reporting a negatively valenced earliest memory and lower likelihood of a specific earliest memory. These findings may reflect mood-congruent biased recall and overly general autobiographical memories among depressed children. Children's earliest memories appear to be affected by depressive mood similarly to other autobiographical memories. Much higher levels of depression in Palestine also explain some of the overall differences between Finnish and Palestinian children.

Remarkably little systematic research exists on children's self-reported earliest memories in different cultures and environments. Yet, earliest memories provide a fascinating window into the developing autobiographical memory. Both current mood and concerns as well as living environment and life experiences appear to contribute to what children offer as their very first memory and how they describe it.

Sources & Acknowledgments

¹ Wang (2004). *Developmental Psychology*, 40(1), 3–15 || ² Wang (2001). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 81(2), 220–2332. || ³ Sahin & Mebert (2013). *Memory*, 21(8), 1004–1017. || ⁴ de la Mata et al. (2015). *Memory Studies*, 8(2), 151–168. || ⁵ Fivush & Merrill (2016). *Memory Studies*, 9(3), 305–314. || See also: Peltonen et al. (2017). *Memory*, 25(10), 1347–1357.

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