Influences of the present on the past: The impact of interpretation on memory for abuse

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Although the future may be open, it is tempting to think of the past as set. However, there is a sense in which the past too is changeable. New perspectives sometimes color or even alter our view of the past. In some cases, new perspectives offer a deeper understanding of our own past experience. For example, in reflecting on what at the time seemed like a minor spat, an estranged spouse may look back and recognize unappreciated tensions. On other occasions a fresh perspective may distort memory. From the bitter vantage of a relationship gone awry, one might come to misconstrue innocent bickerings as the reflection dark feelings that never actually occurred. If memories for prior social interactions are indeed influenced by present understanding then they may be particularly vulnerable when our understanding of the social relationship changes over time. Memory for sexual abuse may fall into this category. The label of "sexual abuse" is somewhat fuzzy, particularly as it is applied to oneself (Joslyn, Carlin, & Loftus, 1997). One could experience an abusive event, but not categorize it as such at the time. Later, if the experience is recalled in the context of abuse, it may be remembered quite differently than if it were recalled in some other context.

In this chapter, we first review evidence that memory for experimentally controlled stimuli is colored by changes in perspective. We then consider the potential for shifts in perspective for events in ones own life, reviewing survey studies that illustrate the manner in which people may initially avoid interpreting their own experiences as CSA. Next, we consider the impact a shift in interpretation might have on memory. We review several case studies of individuals who reported recovering allegedly long forgotten memories of sexual abuse. We consider the possible role that shifts in abuse perspective had in convincing people to think that the memories were previously forgotten, when in fact they were not. Finally we discuss a new

survey study that illustrates the potential impact that changes to an abuse perspective can have on memory for the emotional content of the event. We conclude with some speculations about the possible role that shifts perspective may have in contributing to memory discovery experiences.

The impact of shifting perspectives on memory for the past

The events of the past are inevitably viewed through the interpretive lens of the present. Sometimes this lens offers clarification not previously available. Other times it distorts the past in order to make it more consistent with the present. Numerous laboratory studies have demonstrated that the manner in which we interpret the present colors what we recall from the past. Beginning with paired associate learning, Tulving and Thompson (1972) found that items encoded in one context (e.g. "palm tree") were difficult to recognize when tested in a different context (e.g. "palm hand").

Research on memory for previously read text passages demonstrated that shifts in perspective can have both positive and negative effects on memory. Anderson and Pitchert (1978) induced participants to recall previously unreported details by offering them a new vantage from which to consider a passage read earlier in the session. After reading about an old house from the perspective of either a potential homebuyer or burglar, participants who were encouraged to recall it from the alternative perspective recalled more facts than those who maintained the same perspective. Although shifts in perspective can sometimes enhance memory for text, other studies have illustrated that such shifts can produce systematic distortions. For example, Snyder and Uranowitz (1978) presented participants with an extensive narrative about the life of a woman (Betty K). Later, some participants were told that Betty K. was living a lesbian lifestyle where as other were told that she was living a heterosexual lifestyle.

On a subsequent recognition test, participants' memories were found to be systematically biased towards their new interpretation of Betty K, i.e. those given information about the Lesbian lifestyle remembering details consistent with lesbian stereotypes and vise versa for those given heterosexual information. In a similar vein, Carli (1999) had participants read identical scenarios about a date, with the one difference being the ending. For some subjects the date ended in with a rape, whereas in the other condition it ended in a marriage proposal. On a subsequent memory test, participants' recollections were biased by the perspectives highlighted by the respective endings.

Given the established effects that new perspectives can have on peoples' recollections of laboratory materials, it is intriguing to speculate about whether similar effects may occur when people recall their own lives. Is it the case, as suggested at the outset, that new perspectives can bias individuals' memories for their own personal lives? Although less research has investigated this question, a number of studies suggest that changing perspectives may also systematically color how people recall their own past. For example, Levine and colleagues demonstrated in a series of studies that memory for emotions is systematically distorted to conform to present day appraisals of the remembered event. In one study, people who became more convinced of OJ Simpson's guilt over time overestimated how angry they felt when Simpson was first acquitted. People who became more convinced of his innocence underestimated how angry they felt when they heard that he was acquitted (Levine, Prohaska, Burgess, Rice, & Laulhere, 2001). In another study (Levine, 1997), loyal Ross Perot supporters significantly underestimated their feelings of anger and sadness reported immediately after hearing of his withdrawal from the presidential race. Those who later abandoned him significantly underestimated their feelings of hope reported when they heard that he had withdrawn.

Although the above studies are suggestive, their interpretation is somewhat complicated by the fact that they are ultimately correlational in nature. Perhaps for example, the individuals whose support for Perot waned were actually less committed to him than those whose support was unwavering. However, more recent experimental studies have a demonstrated causal link between perspective shifts and memory for emotion. Specifically, in a study of students' memory for pre-exam anxiety, students who were informed of their midterm exam scores underestimated pre-exam anxiety when they received a good grade and overestimated pre-exam anxiety when they received a poor grade. Importantly, this pattern was not observed among students who had *not* been informed of their score (Safer, Levin & Drapalsky, 2002), suggesting that one's present day view causes the emotional shift rather than vice versa.

In sum, a significant body of evidence is consistent with the claim that shifts in perspective can systematically color individuals initial recollections of events. New perspectives can hinder people's access to information that is inconsistent with the current context (Tulving and Thompson, 1973) and it can enhance memory for otherwise forgotten information that takes on new found significance (Anderson & Pitchert, 1978). It can systematically bias people to recall laboratory based materials in a manner consistent with the new found understanding (e.g. Snyder & Uranowitz, 1978), and it can even cause people to re-construe their own experiences to make them more consistent with their current appraisals (e.g. Levine, 1997). Given the potentially pronounced effect of shifts in perspective on memory, it stands to reason that domains vulnerable changes in perspective may be especially susceptible to the associated memory effects. In the following discussion we consider the impact of shifts in perspective on an often confusing type of personal experience, sexual abuse.

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The role of interpretation in characterizing memories of childhood sexual abuse

CSA might be particularly vulnerable to shifts in perspective because people are hesitant to place personal experiences in that category. In a survey study, the majority of those reporting an unwanted sexual experience failed to classify it as CSA (Joslyn, Carlin, & Loftus, 1997). Responding to an anonymous questionnaire, undergraduate psychology students answered questions about whether they had experienced, as children age 15 years or less, seven specific sexual events (e.g. fondling, exposure to masturbation, etc). A complete list of questions appears in Table 1. Those who answered "yes" to one of the seven main questions also answered a series of subquestions about their understanding of the event and about their subsequent memory for the event. In a separate question, participants were simply asked if they had ever been 'sexually abused' (generic abuse question). The purpose of this question was to ascertain the individual's classification of the event. Surprisingly most of those who experienced at least one of the seven events (76%), failed to classify themselves as abused in answer to the generic abuse question. It did not matter whether the generic abuse question was answered first or last.

Uncertain categorization of potential CSA events may be due in part to the fact that there is little consensus, even among professionals on the definition of 'childhood sexual abuse'. Contentious elements in the definition of CSA include the age range, which constitutes 'childhood', the amount of discrepancy in age between the victim and the perpetrator, what acts are considered 'sexual', and the criteria by which the experience is described as 'abusive'. Thus a personally experienced event may fit under one version of this definition but fail to be classified as CSA under another definition. To get at this issue, respondents were also asked questions about their definition of sexual abuse. They were asked which of the same seven events would constitute sexual abuse in the abstract. We refer to these as definition questions. The description of the events, shown in Table 3, was identical to that included in the questions

about personal experience. Of those who reported at least one event but denied being sexually abused in answer to the generic question, 90% contradicted their own definition of sexual abuse to do so. Thus, 62% of those who reported at least one event, such as being fondled also indicated being fondled constituted sexual abuse in the abstract but failed to classify themselves as sexually abused. We will refer to such participants as "self-excluders" because they exclude themselves from the category of sexually abused. This result suggests that people are extremely reluctant to classify personally experienced events as CSA. The reluctance is so strong that it leads them to classify identically described events differently on a one page questionnaire, depending on whether or not they were personally experienced.

The fact that so many peoples' classification of personal events contradicted their own definition of sexual abuse was quite surprising and lead to a follow up study (Joslyn & Loftus, unpublished) to uncover the reasoning behind this behavior. Using the identical paradigm, a new group of respondents was also asked an open-ended question about why they failed to classify themselves as abused. Again, the majority of those (74%) reporting at least one event failed to classify themselves as abused in response to the generic abuse question. Three quarters of those offered written explanations for their decision. For about 14% the written descriptions revealed that the event might well *not* have been sexual abuse (e.g. accidental viewing of undressed family member). For another 10% the perpetrator was another child and were excluded for that reason. However, approximately half indicated that the event that they experienced did not constitute sexual abuse because of some mitigating factor such as that the perpetrator was drunk. An 18-year-old female wrote that the event she reported was not abuse because 'The man was drunk and apologized to me when he sobered up.' Several others wrote that they did not consider their experience CSA because they did not voice their objections

sufficiently strongly. A 19-year-old female wrote 'I don't feel what happened was abusive because I let it happen'. Another quarter simply took issue with the term "sexual abuse" and preferred to call it something else such as "harassment". Thus the majority of those who answered the question appeared to be searching for some loophole that would allow them to exclude themselves from the category of sexually abused.

This elaborate reasoning may be motivated by the fact that "sexually abused" is seen as a negative label. People's reluctance to assume what is perceived as a negative label is a well documented (Knutson & Selner, 1994, Savin-Williams, 1989). This too could have an impact on autobiographical memory. There is evidence that the way in which we view ourselves, the 'self-schema', influences memory (Greenwald, 1980). Information that is less consistent with the self-schema or less self-relevant is less well remembered (Markus, 1977; Mischel, Ebbesen & Zeiss, 1976; Rogers, 1973). There is support for this notion in the survey study reported above (Joslyn et al. 1998). There was an association between respondents interpretation of the event (whether or not they saw it as sexual) and their reported memory for the event. Those who failed to classify it as sexual reported more forgetting. Whether or not they actually remembered the event less often in the past is open to question. Evidence reviewed below suggests that people are not always accurate when reporting whether or not they remembered something in the past. This is especially true in situations involving a shift in perspective.

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The role of changes of interpretation in discovered memories of abuse

Although people may succeed in avoiding viewing their experiences as sexual abuse for some time, events may occur that compel them to re-examine and re-classify their experiences. In such cases, there may be memorial consequences to changing ones view of the experience to an incident of sexual abuse. People may regard the re-classified event as a newly recovered

memory. This appears to be the explanation for several cases of allegedly recovered CSA memories for which Schooler and colleagues (Schooler, Bendiksen & Ambadar, 1996; Schooler 2001) attempted to corroborate the original event. In these studies, Schooler et al. reported two cases in which individuals perspectives on their abuse experiences appeared to have changed significantly, potentially altering both their construal of the experience and perhaps their characterizations of their forgetting. In one case, WB, a 40-year-old female, described a memory discovery experience where in she recalled being raped while hitchhiking as a teenager. Although her former husband indicated that she had mentioned this experience several times prior to this discovery experience (including the day that it happened, and subsequently over the years in a matter of fact non-emotional manner), at the time of the discovery experience she experienced a sense of emotional shock reporting "complete chaos in my emotions" and sense of being overwhelmed: "I was overwhelmed, rather than surprised, surprised is too neutral a feeling for what I felt." She also reported a seemingly new awareness of the meaning of the experience. In a letter written several days after her discovery she wrote that her initial thoughts after recalling this experience were: "My god…I had been raped!…That's a crime! I was 16, just a kid! I couldn't defend myself". This characterization conflicted with the manner in which she recalled herself originally construing the event as a teenager. Originally she considered this event a sexual experience gone awry: "I made such a mess out of it by resisting what I thought was supposed to be a sexual experience". Indeed, although WB reported that she believed she had forgotten the experience, she also speculated that this might have occurred because she downplayed its significance noting, "In a way, I have managed to repress the meaning of what happened all of these years. I have pushed it away, minimized it... It wasn't a real rape." Notably, her discovery of a new understanding of the experience, may have been confused with

her discovery of the memory itself, leading her to believe that she had entirely forgotten the experience, when in fact she was found to have reportedly talked about it. This suggests that memory for remembering an event encoded under a one classification may be difficult with the cues available after a shift in classification has taken place.

A similar role of re-interpretation in discovered memories was implicated in the case of TW, who like WB, had a memory discovery experience for abuse that she had previously repeatedly mentioned to her husband. TW's memory discovery occurred in the context of considering seeing a lecture on sexual abuse. Reflecting on the topic, she suddenly recalled having been fondled by a family friend when she was nine. At the time of the memory discovery, she similarly recalled a sense of shock and an on rush of emotion: "When I first remembered it I was surprised. Completely taken back by it. Then I. I don't even remember speaking... I was completely out of it". However, like WB, TW's husband reported that she had mentioned (with flat affect) the experience several times during the period that TW believed she had forgotten it. Indeed TW was startled to learn that she had talked about this experience with her husband noting that when she found out she had told him of this experience she: "felt like falling over. Absolutely shocked and floored that it happened. And I still am... I can't remember telling him, I can't think of anything about the memory before [the recovery], and it's very disturbing, actually. ". As in the case of WB, TW recalled her initial interpretation of the experience as being different than the characterization of abuse at which she ultimately arrived. Initially she recalled the experience as a socially awkward moment for which she was responsible. As TW put it "I mean it sounds very silly actually to me. Because I remember this guy was making some kind of disgusted sound…then he pushed me away. And my immediate interpretation was that I had done something wrong, and that I was some how at fault". In short,

both TW and WB presented cases in which a significant change in interpretation of the experience was associated both with increased appraisal of the severity of the experience, and a sense that the memory had previously been forgotten, even though evidence indicated that they talked about it repeatedly.

A number of recent empirical studies also support the notion that memory for prior episodes of remembering, like memory in general, can be quite fallible (Joslyn et al, 2000). Studies have shown that that people sometimes forget recalling a childhood event that was brought to mind only minutes earlier (Parks, 1999). Memory for remembering may also be subject to reconstruction. People's memory for memory judgments are influenced by recent retrieval attempts (Belli, Winkielman, Read, Schwarz, & Lynn, 1998) the type of memory test (Padilla & Poole, 1999) and the similarity of cues between encoding and test (Arnold & Lindsay, 2000).

This body of evidence supports the notion that if an autobiographical event is remembered under one categorization at an early time, it may be very difficult to recall *remembering* it later, after a shift in categorization. Because recalling awkward physical encounter may be quite different from remembering being sexually abused, it seems plausible that a shift in interpretation could lead to the impression that the event was previous forgotten, when in fact it was consistently available. In short, changes in the interpretation of an abuse experience could influence both ones recollections of the abuse itself (perhaps imbuing it with greater emotional intensity than was originally present) as well as ones metamemory understanding (perhaps confusing the a new understanding of the experience with the discovery of a previously hidden memory).

The impact of interpretation on memory for abuse: A recent study

In the final study we will discuss, Joslyn & Schooler (2005) explored the impact of a shift in interpretation of an autobiographical event on memory for the emotional content of that event. We were interested in the self-exclusion phenomenon associated with CSA described above (Joslyn et al. 1997), i.e. many people who report an unwanted sexual abuse experience that fits their own definition of sexual abuse, fail to classify themselves as having been sexually abused. We wondered what would happen if we brought the definition of sexual abuse to the fore .Would respondents be less likely to exclude themselves from the abused category? If so, what impact would that have on their memory for the event.

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We asked the same main questions about experience specific unwanted sexual events as were asked in Joslyn et al. 1997,[1] Under each main question we asked a series of subquestions. Here, we focus on the questions asking how upset respondents were when the event occurred and how upset they were in the present as they thought back on it.[2]In addition, we asked participants a separate generic abuse question: 'Were you ever sexually abused'. Finally, we asked whether same seven specific events were considered sexual abuse in the abstract, the definition questions. Crucially we varied the position of the definition questions. In the control condition, all of the definition questions were presented at the end of the questionnaire as they had been in Joslyn et al. 1997. In the experimental condition, however, we presented each definition question just prior to the corresponding question that asked about personal experience of that event (definition-salient).

We hypothesized that respondents would be less likely to exclude themselves from the category of "sexually abused" if the abstract definition question was asked first, emphasizing the

[1] Although we amended them to include the phrase "by an adult, someone 18 years old or older"..

fact that the event they experienced fell into their own general definition of sexual abuse. In other words we thought that increasing the salience of the definition would compel some respondents to reclassify personal experiences as CSA, i.e. to become non-excluders. As a result we expected to see fewer self-excluders in the definition salient condition. We also expected to see a difference in the remembered emotion that accompanied that event.

We replicated the basic findings of Joslyn et al, 1997. Of the 705 respondents, 92 (13%, 92/705) said 'yes' to at least one of the events. Again, the majority of those who experienced an unwanted sexual event refused to call themselves sexually abused (53/92, 58%) when answering the generic question. The vast majority of those (80%, 42/53) did so despite the fact that they indicated that the same event constituted abuse in the abstract. For example, they reported being fondled, they considered fondling CSA but said that they were not sexually abused. The distribution of all four responses (abused, self-excluders, don't knows, and those who did not regard the personally experienced event as abuse when described in the abstract) appears in figure 1.

Placing the definition question first seems to have had an impact on self-exclusion. As seen in figure 2, self-excluders were the majority of respondents in the control condition of the questionnaire. The pattern was reversed in the definition salient condition. There were fewer self-excluders than others[3]. This suggests that, as predicted, answering the definition question prior to the personal experience question prevented some individuals from excluding themselves for the CSA category. Nonetheless a surprising number held on to their misclassification despite being forced to answer the two questions side-by-side.

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[2] We also asked how recently the respondent had thought about the event, and whether it was every completely forgotten

[3] This pattern that was marginally significant in a one tailed chi square analysis (p= .07).

We hypothesized that the ensuing shift in classification would influence reported feelings about the event as well. We expected participants in the definition-salient condition to report being more upset about the event because they would be less likely exclude themselves from the CSA category. This hypothesis was supported. Note in figure 3 that non-excluders reported having been more upset in the definition salient condition than did self-excluders. In the control condition the pattern was reversed. Self-excluders were slightly more upset than were non-excluders. This suggests that many of those in the definition salient condition who would have been self-excluders, experienced a shift in classification of the event due to the proximity of the definition that colored their memory for the emotions associated with the event.

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Deleted: (*M*=4.8, *SD*=2.6). This interaction was significant (*F* (1/80)=5.25, *p*=. 02)

In the final study presented here, there was a smaller proportion of self-excluders in the definition salient condition (albeit only marginally significant) suggesting an experimentally induced shift in respondents' classification of personally experienced events. This implies that some participants who would otherwise have failed to do so, reclassified autobiographical events as sexual abuse. When consciously thinking about the definition of CSA they were compelled to regard some personally experienced events as sexual abuse. They became nonexcluders. Moreover, reclassification appears to have colored their memory of the event. In the definition salient condition, nonexcluders, presumably including those who recently reclassified the event, reported having been more upset about it at the time. There were no systematic differences between conditions in terms of the type or number of events reported. Consequently, the difference in reported distress was very likely due to the salience of the definition itself. This suggests that participants' memory for how they felt about the event at the time may have been changed in the course of reclassification.

Summary and Conclusions

To summarize, the studies reviewed here suggest that shifts in perspective can impact memory in several different ways. They can enhance memory by bringing forth additional details, they can distort memory to conform to present perspectives and they can even influence metamemory judgements. Personal events, such a CSA, which are particularly vulnerable to shifts in interpretation may be particularly vulnerable in terms of memory as well. Whether a personal experience is regarded as CSA may impact the accessibility of that memory, well as whether one remembers remembering it and the emotional content one remembers. In the questionnaire studies reviewed, young adult participants appeared to be extremely reluctant to regard themselves as having been sexually abused. In both studies, a large percentage of respondents who reported an unwanted sexual experiences as children were self-excluders. Although self-excluders regarded an abstract description of the event as sexual abuse, their pattern of responses indicated that they did not consider the same event, when personally experienced, to be CSA. Moreover, respondents understanding of the unwanted sexual event impacted their reported memory. Poorly categorized events may be recalled less often simply because they are less well connected to autobiographical memory as a whole and hence are accessible by fewer retrieval paths. Events that are likely to be inadequately categorized are events that are poorly understood or events for which the proper category is regarded as negative.

The case study evidence reviewed suggests that a shift in categorization also impacts metamemory. Events, which are originally poorly categorized, may eventually be categorized as CSA. This in turn give the impression of previous forgetting. The evidence reviewed here suggests that although the events were remembered under some other categorization, they is

difficult to recall remembering the event when they were later considered CSA. In addition, we presented new evidence that suggests that a shift in classification affects ones memory for the emotions that accompanied that event. The same events, interpreted as CSA appear to be remembered as being more upsetting. These results imply that simply changing the order in which the questions were asked , influenced both participants tendency to describe themselves as victims of abuse, as well as their memory for how upset they were at the time. This raises important methodological issues about the use of questionnaire data for assessing such experiences, reinforcing the well established fact (Schwarz, 1999) that the order in which questions are asked can meaningfully impact the responses individuals provide. For the memory researchers it means that the manner in which one probes memory determines, to a certain degree what one finds out.

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In closing we note, that although this chapter has primarily focused on the impact of categorization of autobiographical events on the recollection of childhood sexual abuse, it seems likely that similar factors influence various other kinds autobiographical events for which interpretations can change. Understanding how fluctuations in the interpretations of experiences influence recollections may be an important new avenue for exploring the dynamic quality of memory. Shifts in interpretation may also provide one approach to understanding why people report that seemingly highly salient experiences were previously forgotten.

Table 1. Main questions asked including seven specifically described events questions (1-7) and the generic abuse question (8).

1. During childhood, were you ever exposed to adult's sexual private parts in a way that made you uncomfortable?`` **yes☐ no☐ don't know☐**

2. During childhood, did an adult ever masturbate in front of you ?

yes☐ no☐ don't know☐

3. During childhood, did an adult ever touch your body, including your breasts or private parts in a way that made you uncomfortable?

yes☐ no☐ don't know☐

4. During childhood, did an adult rub their private parts against you in a way that made you uncomfortable?

yes☐ no☐ don't know☐

5. During childhood, did an adult put their mouth on your body in a manner that made you uncomfortable?

yes☐ no☐ don't know☐

6.During childhood, were you ever forced to touch the sexual private parts of an adult in a way that made you uncomfortable? **yes□ no□ don't know□**

7. Were you forced to have intercourse with an adult against your will during childhood?

yes□ no□ don't know□

8. Were you sexually abused by an adult during childhood ? **yes□ no□ don't know□**

Table 2

Sub-questions asked under each specific event question on the questionnaire.

If YES..._____

1a. After it happened , was there ever a time lasting a few weeks or more, during which you did not think about it at all? yes ☐ no ☐ don' t know ☐

1b. Was there ever a period during which you would not have remembered this event, even if you were asked about it directly? yes ☐ no ☐ don' t know ☐

1c. Do you think of this event as sexual in nature? yes ☐ no ☐ don' t know ☐

If yes, did you understand it as sexual when it happened? yes ☐ no ☐ don' t know ☐

Table 3.

Question number 9 on the questionnaire.

In your opinion, do any of the following acts constitute sex abuse?

1. Being exposed to someone's sexual private parts in a way that makes you uncomfortable.

2. Someone masturbating in front of you.

3. Someone touching your body, including your breasts or private parts in a way that makes you uncomfortable

4. Someone rubbing their private parts against you in a way that makes you uncomfortable?

5.Someone putting their mouth on your body in a manner that makes you uncomfortable?

6. Being forced to touch the sexual private parts of another person in a way that makes you uncomfortable?

7. Being forced to have intercourse against your will

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Figure 1. Distribution of respondents

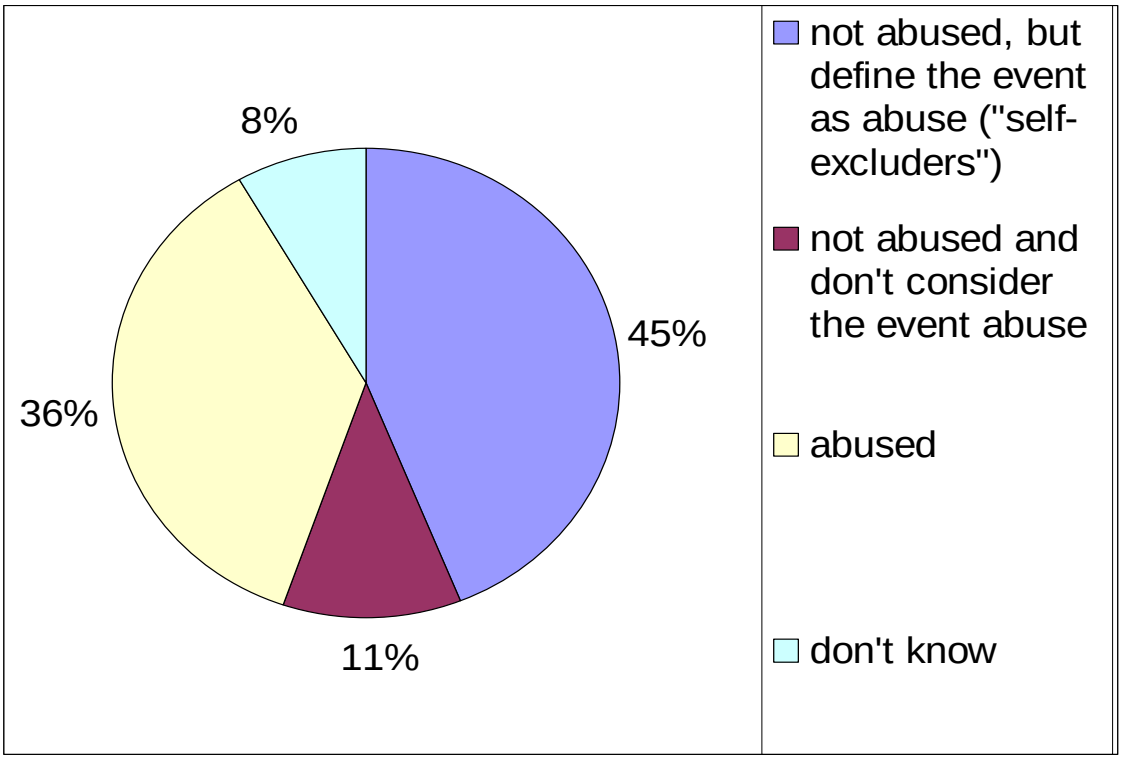
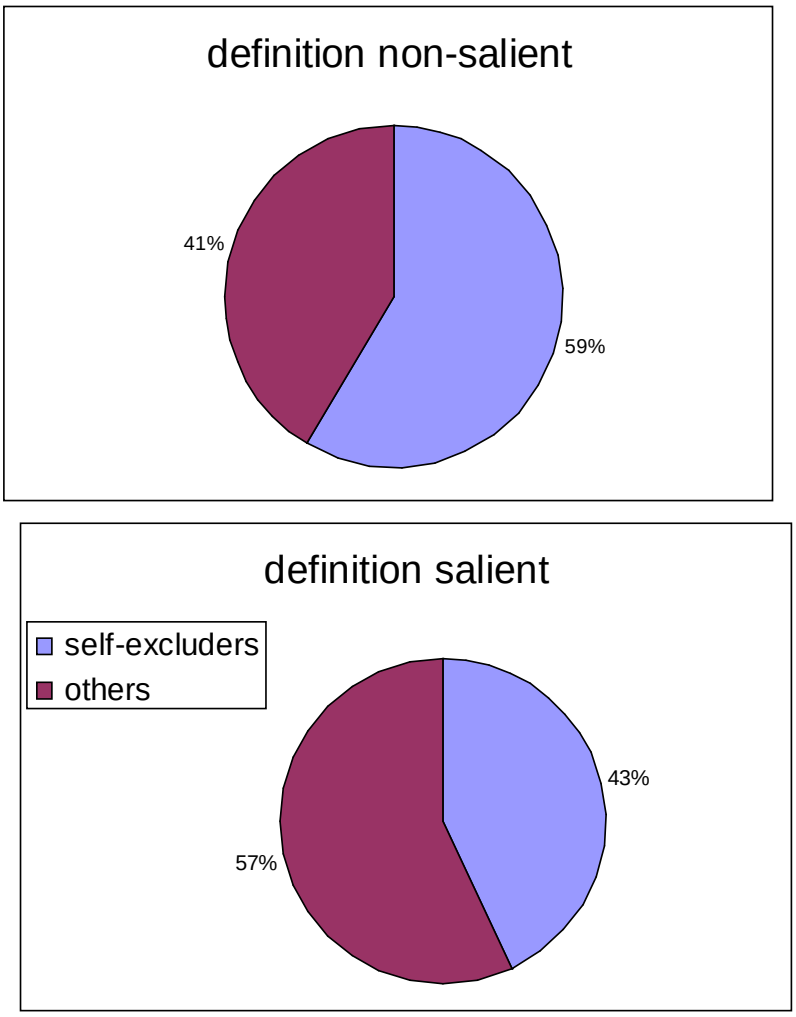


Figure 2.


definition non-salient
41%
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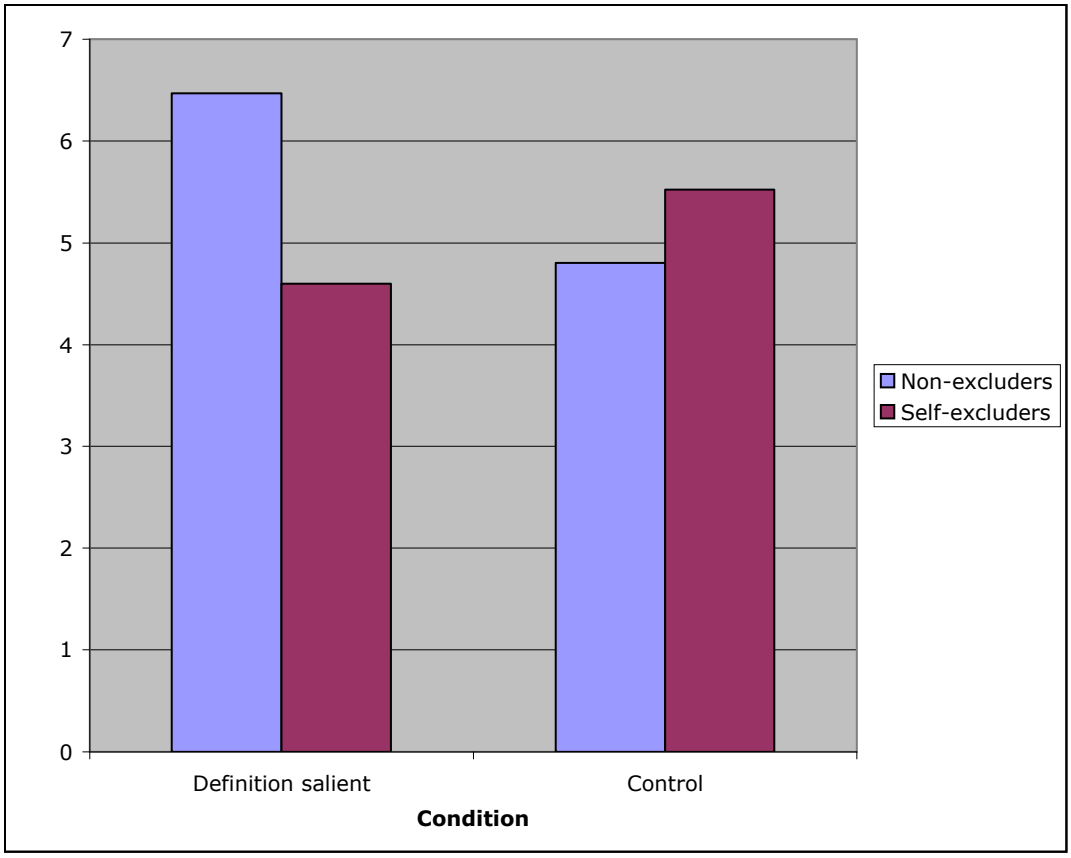
definition salient
self-excluders
others
43%
57%

Figure 3- The relationship between condition and self-exclusion on mean ratings of participants recalled upsetness at the time of the abuse.



Deleted: Whether one remembers or forgets a specific autobiographical memory depends in part upon the compatibility in classification of that event between encoding and retrieval. This in turn may be influenced by was society perceives as an undesirable label. ¶
¶
¶
¶
Amount remembered events
Memory for emotions is distorted by present classification¶