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The Organisation of Autobiographical Memories in East and West Germans - Differences due to the Fall of the Berlin Wall

Important public events, like a war or an earthquake, are thought to structure autobiographical memories (Brown, Hansen, Lee, Vanderveen, & Conrad, 2011). For example, people know whether something happened before or after the earthquake, and so they will date their memories in relation to the public event. Especially people who experienced a lot of changes in their fabric of daily life due to an event, will structure their memories in relation to this event. In Germany the fall of the Berlin Wall was an important public event for East- and West Germans. Although all Germans remember the fall of the Berlin Wall, it is likely that East Germans experienced a lot more changes in their fabric of daily life than West Germans as a result of this event. Therefore, it is likely that the fall of the Berlin Wall structures autobiographical memories of East Germans, but not so much of West Germans. This hypothesis was tested in a group of East and West German participants. The participants generated 22 memories related to simple word cues such as *kitchen* or *book*. Then they were asked to date these memories while thinking aloud. Thus, it could be observed which kind of events people use to date a memory. Further, the participants answered a questionnaire measuring the extent of changes in their fabric of daily life due to the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the valence of these changes. As expected, East Germans dated more memories with reference to the fall of the Berlin Wall than West Germans, probably because the fall of the Berlin Wall caused more changes in their fabric of daily life.

Furthermore, we also expected other important events in a person's life to structure autobiographical memory, if these events caused a lot of changes. The findings show that people use personal events (e.g. moving to another city, partner's disease) and cultural life script events (e.g. begin school, birth of a child, marriage) very often to date their memories. But in these cases no differences were found between East and West Germans.