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The beginning of the life story: The meaning of the earliest autobiographical memory from an adult perspective

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Abstract

Earliest autobiographical memories mark a potential beginning of our life story. However, their meaning has hardly been investigated. Against this background, participants ($N = 182$) were asked to think about two kinds of meaning: the meaning that the remembered event might have had in the moment of experience and the meaning that the memory of the event has for their present life situation. With respect to the meaning in the moment of experience, participants most frequently referred to situational characteristics. The meaning for the present life situation was most frequently related to aspects of the memory that told something about the person beyond the immediate context of the remembered event. Moreover, these meanings were more frequently associated with continuity than with a contrast between then and now. Apart from these overarching commonalities, our data also show that the earliest autobiographical memories of different people can tell very different stories.

KEYWORDS
autobiographical memory, earliest autobiographical memories, early memory, life story, meaning-making

Human beings are storytellers. That does not only refer to the stories that we read in a novel or to the bedtime stories that we make up for our children, but also to the stories that we tell about our own lives and the stories that we hear told about the lives of others. These autobiographical stories serve a purpose (see, e.g., Bluck et al., 2005; Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 2001; McAdams & McLean, 2013; McAdams & Olson, 2010; Singer, 2004): They help us to build a narrative identity that connects our past to our present and to our imagined future and that provides us with a sense of unity and coherence. Ultimately, constructing life narratives can contribute to self-development (McLean et al., 2007) and well-being (Adler et al., 2016). Note, however, that the content and the structure of our autobiographical stories are not fixed, but may change over time, depending on our cultural and social background as well as normative shifts or the circumstances of our lives (McAdams, 2008).

Leaving aside the information that we may have collected from others, the life story that we construct and constantly refine does typically not begin at the beginning: as adults, we do not have autobiographical memories for the first three or four years of our lives—a phenomenon, which has been termed *infantile* or *childhood amnesia* (Freud, 1905/1953; Henri & Henri, 1897, as translated in Nicolas et al., 2013; Miles, 1895; for a review, see, for example, Bauer, 2015). In addition, adult autobiographical memory for the years following is still reduced and only reaches a more adult-like distribution at the end of the first decade of life (e.g., Bauer, 2007). Hence, the earliest autobiographical memories that we still have as adults "bear a substantial portion of the burden for ensuring a stable sense of self over time and place for virtually the entire period of early childhood" (Bauer et al., 2014, p. 77). In other words, our earliest autobiographical memories are not random "flashes in the dark" (Draaisma, 2012), but may play an important role within our life story.

What do we know about these earliest autobiographical memories? Previous empirical research has largely focused on two aspects:

the *phenomenological characteristics* of earliest autobiographical memories and their *content* (for an overview, see Lind et al., 2020). With respect to the *phenomenological characteristics*, it has been demonstrated that early autobiographical memories are less vivid (Kihlstrom & Harackiewicz, 1982; Tustin & Hayne, 2010) and less complete (Bruce et al., 2005; Peterson et al., 2005) than later memories, but that they nevertheless seem to be relatively accurate and stable over time (Bauer & Larkina, 2014; Tustin & Hayne, 2010; but see Ece et al., 2019). In addition, previous research has also investigated the role of the five senses in the context of earliest memories (Hutmacher, 2021). With respect to the *content*, it has been shown that earliest autobiographical memories often have a strong emotional valence (Henri & Henri, 1897; Howes et al., 1993; Kihlstrom & Harackiewicz, 1982), which can be either positive or negative, and that turning points and transitional events play a prominent role within the different kinds of memories (McAdams, 2013; Usher & Neisser, 1993). Interestingly, the degree to which the content of early autobiographical memory is self-focused or centered on collective activities and social relations is influenced by cultural as well as individual differences regarding self-goals (Wang, 2001, 2006; see also Aydin & Conway, 2020).

However, what about the *meaning* of earliest autobiographical memories? What do these memories tell us about the remembering individual and what makes them important? These questions have been of particular interest to some of the founding fathers of modern psychology, namely Sigmund Freud and Alfred Adler (for the early history of the psychology of autobiographical memory, see Sotgiu, 2021, Chapter 2). In his analysis, Freud (1899/1962) explicitly refers to the above-mentioned pioneer study by Henri and Henri (1897), which had demonstrated that the majority of earliest autobiographical memories represent highly emotional episodes. However, Freud was more interested in the minority of memories that were banal and harmless—or, as he saw it, *seemingly* banal and *seemingly* harmless. As Freud hypothesized, these memories served as *screen memories* that helped to conceal and repress traumatic events and conflicts, which could then be uncovered during the psychoanalytic process. While Adler (1931) shared Freud's notion that earliest autobiographical memories are meaningful and important, he considered them to be rather revealing than concealing (cf. Bruhn & Last, 1982). As he argued, earliest autobiographical memories quite openly tell us something about the individual's style of life and important biographical themes.

Given this early interest in the meaning of earliest autobiographical memories and given that the process of meaning-making in life narratives has received considerable attention in recent years (see, e.g., McAdams & McLean, 2013; McLean & Pratt, 2006), it is actually surprising that the number of contemporary empirical studies on the meaning of earliest autobiographical memories is quite limited—especially compared to the numerous investigations on other aspects of these memories, such as their average age. One recent study that has not investigated *earliest*, but *early* autobiographical memories, has confirmed the general idea that these early memories are often infused with personal and biographical meaning (Peterson et al., 2016). Another, slightly older line of research has expanded on the Adlerian perspective and demonstrated that the way individuals remember their earliest autobiographical memories is indicative of their current developmental tasks—and may accordingly change over time as these developmental tasks change (e.g., Josselson, 2000; Kroger, 1990; Orlofsky & Frank, 1986). As these studies show, autobiographical events in general and earliest autobiographical memories in particular do not have an objective meaning, but are open to reevaluations and changing interpretations, which are driven by the themes and conflicts of the current self. Thus, investigating the meaning of earliest autobiographical memories is not concerned with the veracity of these meanings, but rather with understanding the narratives that people use to construct them (cf. Adler et al., 2017).

What is missing from the literature, however, is a comprehensive overview of the different kinds of meaning that individuals ascribe to their earliest autobiographical memories from an adult perspective. Hence, the main goal of the present study was to provide such an overview. To this end, we propose to distinguish two kinds of meaning: the meaning an event has when focusing on the *moment of experience* and the meaning that this event may still have *for one's present life* (cf. the distinction between an 'experiencing self' and a 'remembering self' in Kahneman, 2011; for a single-case study, see Hutmacher, 2018). For instance, the birth of one's younger brother may in retrospect be seen as an event that was important and meaningful in the moment of experience as it profoundly changed the interactions and the structure of the family from one moment to the next. As far as the meaning for one's present life is concerned, the birth of the younger brother could be perceived as meaningful as it represents the moment in which the family became complete or—on the contrary—the moment in which the older sibling lost the parents' undivided love and affection. If the life situation changes, the meaning of the earliest childhood memory for one's present life may change, because some aspects of this memory become more, while others become less important. Ultimately, this could also lead to a reinterpretation of the event's meaning in the moment of experience, as one may come to a new perspective on what 'actually' happened back then.

Against this background, we asked participants to describe their earliest autobiographical memories as well as the meaning that they see in these memories when focusing on the moment of experience and when thinking about their present life. Based on the empirical evidence and the theoretical conceptualizations described above, we tentatively assumed that the meanings that participants ascribe to their earliest autobiographical memories would fall into three broad categories. Especially from an Adlerian perspective, one could hypothesize that earliest autobiographical memories are perceived as meaningful because they say something about the *person* who has made the experience. The fact that earliest memories do often not portray banal but important and emotional rich events, suggests that these memories could also be meaningful because of their *situational characteristics*. Finally, as earliest autobiographical memories are not necessarily focused on the self but can also capture key aspects of *social relations* and collective activities, this interactional dimension could also be perceived as important and meaningful.

Based on these considerations, we addressed three interrelated research questions. First, do the above-mentioned broad categories provide a reasonable framework for systematizing the meanings

ascribed to earliest autobiographical memories—and does the frequency distribution of these categories differ between the two kinds of meaning? If this were the case, this would indicate that individuals are indeed able to distinguish the meaning that they see in the event when focusing on the moment of experience from the meaning for their present lives, and that these two kinds of meaning are—at least potentially—centered around different themes. Second, when considering the meaning of their earliest autobiographical memories for their present lives, will participants rather emphasize continuity or contrast between then and now? Based on the observation that the construction of a coherent and continuous life narrative contributes to a sense of unity (e.g., McAdams, 2001; Singer, 2004), one may hypothesize that participants will not so much focus on the disruptive elements of their earliest autobiographical memories, but rather on the similarities between their early childhood days and their present lives (for some preliminary evidence, see also Tobin & Etigson, 1968). Third, and maybe most importantly, which subcategories can be identified beyond the three broad categories described above? Even when the meanings that individuals ascribe to their earliest autobiographical memories fall into a limited number of overarching categories, exploring the variation within these categories remains relevant and can be a valuable starting point for further investigating the role of earliest memories within the life narrative. The data were analyzed using mixed methods: a qualitative content analysis of open-ended responses, followed by a statistical comparison of category frequencies.

1 | METHOD

1.1 | Participants

In total, 184 participants completed the online study on SoSci Survey (Leiner, 2019) using their personal electronic devices. One participant was excluded because the participant had described a moment right after birth. A second participant was excluded as the participant did not describe a specific memory, but a seemingly random event at the age of twelve. Thus, the final sample consisted of 182 participants (18–79 years, $M = 29.46$, $SD = 12.93$, 138 female, 44 male; for more information about the sample characteristics, see the Supplemental Material). While the overall age range was quite broad, the vast majority of the participants were young adults between 18 and 30 years of age ($N = 150$, 82.4%). Participants were recruited through personal contact and via social media. Participants enrolled in the psychology program of the University of Regensburg (Germany) received course credit. The remaining participants could take part in a lottery to win one of four 10€ vouchers. Participants provided informed consent. The study was conducted in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration and the University Research Ethics Standards. In Germany, these types of psychological studies do not require ethical approval of an Ethics Committee. Data collection took place from August 22 to November 2, 2020. The study lasted about 20 minutes. All data exclusions, manipulations, and measures are reported.

1.2 | Materials

1.2.1 | Description of the earliest autobiographical memory

Participants were asked to give a detailed description of their earliest autobiographical memory in an open text field. They were asked to name a specific event and to describe what happened, where it happened and who was involved as well as to remember their thoughts and feelings in the situation. Participants were instructed to take their time in case they had problems retrieving a memory. They were also told to select the memory that they deemed the earliest, in case they were able to retrieve more than one early memory.

1.2.2 | Meaning when focusing on the moment of experience

Participants were asked whether they had any idea what the event that they had remembered meant to them as a child and to describe these ideas in an open text field. Participants were told that there are no right or wrong answers and that they should take their time to think about the question. In case participants had no idea what the memory could have meant to them as a child, they were able to skip this question.

1.2.3 | Meaning for the present life

Participants were asked whether they could see a reference between their earliest autobiographical memory and their present life and, if so, how this reference can be described. Answers were provided in an open text field. Furthermore, as before, participants were told that there are no right or wrong answers and that they should take their time to think about the question. In case participants did not see a reference between the memory and their present life situation, they were able to skip this question.

1.2.4 | Retrieval strategies

Participants were asked to state which of the following two response options was more accurate for them: (a) "I did not have to think long until I knew which memory I want to describe," (b) "It took me some time to decide which memory I want to describe." Participants who selected the second option were asked to describe their retrieval strategies in an open text field.

1.2.5 | Importance

To capture the importance of the described memories, we used a slightly modified version of two items proposed by Ece et al. (2019):

"Compared to other memories: How important is the memory that you have described?," "How important was this event for your personality development?" Items were answered on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = "very unimportant" to 5 = "very important").

1.2.6 | Age

Participants estimated their age at the time of their first autobiographical memory that they had just described. Participants selected the number of years and months from a dropdown menu.

1.2.7 | Memory experiences questionnaire

For exploratory purposes and to have more information about the earliest autobiographical memories, we used the short form of the Memory Experiences Questionnaire (MEQ-SF; Luchetti & Sutin, 2016), which captures the phenomenology of autobiographical memories on 10 dimensions (i.e., vividness, coherence, accessibility, time perspective, sensory details, visual perspective, emotional intensity, sharing, distancing, and valence) using 31 items (e.g., "My memory for this event is very vivid," "The order of events in the memory is clear," "This memory was easy for me to recall"), which are answered on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree").

1.3 | Procedure

After providing informed consent, participants were asked to remember and to describe their earliest autobiographical memory. Subsequently, participants described the meaning that they saw in the memory when focusing on the moment of experience as well as the memory's meaning for their present life. After answering the question regarding the retrieval strategies, the two items regarding the importance of the retrieved memory, and indicating their age at the time of the memory, participants filled in the MEQ-items and provided demographic data (age, gender, occupation).

1.4 | Qualitative data analysis

The data were analyzed with MAXQDA 2020 (VERBI Software) using qualitative content analysis (see, e.g., Mayring, 2014, 2021). To ensure the objectivity of the coding process, two coders analyzed the data. As being familiar with the challenges of qualitative data analysis and the literature on autobiographical memory can be considered important preconditions for arriving at a meaningful and sensitive interpretation of the data, the authors served as coders. As stated in the introduction, it seemed plausible to assume that the meanings that participants ascribed to their earliest autobiographical memories would fall into three broad categories: memories that are meaningful because they say something about the *person* who has made the experience, memories that are meaningful because of their *situational characteristics*, and memories that are meaningful as they capture important aspects of certain *social relations*. However, remaining open to reconsider such a priori categories instead of forcing the data into them is key to qualitative data analysis.

Hence, the creation of the codebook that was later used for coding the data began with initiating text work (e.g., Kuckartz, 2019). That is, an initial read-through of the material was used to create the different categories. The two coders familiarized themselves with the data independently from one another. Then, each coder created an initial draft for a codebook. These two drafts were discussed between the two coders and integrated into a final codebook. Both coders agreed that three broad categories mentioned above provided a reasonable framework for analyzing and systematizing the data. The final codebook included definitions of each category as well as examples and explicit coding rules. For instance, the codebook stated that the category *first time and novelty* (see Table 1 below) should be assigned to earliest autobiographical memories "in which it was emphasized that something happened for the first time, that something new happened or that it was a situation that one had not experienced before."

As the study primarily focused on the meaning that participants ascribe to their earliest autobiographical memories, the codebook contained categories to capture the meanings in the moment of experience and for the present (as well as the retrieval strategies that participants used), while we decided not to include categories to analyze the content of the descriptions of the earliest autobiographical memories. However, these descriptions still played a vital role during the analysis process: They provided the context that was necessary to fully and correctly understand the meanings that participants ascribed to their memories. In addition, the descriptions of the memories sometimes already contained explicit interpretations or interpretative elements. Whenever this was the case, these parts of the participants' descriptions were also coded.

After creating the final codebook, the data were coded. As memories can have multiple meanings, coding a memory with multiple codes was allowed. In a first step, the two coders coded 20% of the data independently from one another. Then, the interrater reliability (Brennan & Prediger, 1981) was calculated. In other words, it was calculated whether the two coders matched in their coding of the material. Two coded segments of the material were considered to match when the overlapping rate of the two codes was 90% or higher. The interrater reliability indicated substantial agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977), $\kappa = 0.74$. The coders discussed the differences with respect to their coding of the first 20% of the data and agreed upon a final solution. Given the substantial agreement between the two coders, one coder coded the remaining material. However, all ambiguous sections within the remaining material were discussed between the two coders.

2 | RESULTS

As they were not part of the main research question, the results with respect to the retrieval strategies as well as with respect to the

TABLE 1 Meaning when focusing on the moment of experience: Category frequencies and examples

Category	Examples	Frequency
Person		59 (Total)
Personal insight	"I realized […] that my mistakes have consequences, which cannot be changed anymore"; "I think I learned from this incident that I need to listen more to my perceptions and my intuition"	13
Autonomy	"It was the first time […] that I decided something that was important for my development on my own"; "Independence from my father or my mother"	11
Competence	"The feeling of success was formative"; "I was proud how well this experiment […] had turned out"	11
Representing one's personality	"I have always been a very empathic person"; "Being ashamed of my behavior and my body are reoccurring topics in my memories"	8
Approval and being special	"I felt fantastic and beautiful, and I was proud to be part of this group. Only a couple of people were selected"; "Maybe it was already the wish to be approved by society"	7
Realizing one's individuality	"It was the insight that I perceive myself and the others as separate from myself"; "It was the first time that I perceived myself and my environment so consciously"	4
Contradicting one's personality	"I was always following the rules, so this is why this was a special event, as I had done something that my parents found very bad"	2
Other		3
Situation		175 (Total)
Traumatic experience	"I still remember how my leg was pulsating. The pain was unbearable."; "I remember getting lost in a hotel as a young child."	41
First time and novelty	"It was the first step from my protected home into a new environment"; "Building the first real friendships"	34
Special situation	"The birth of my younger sister"; "The [total solar eclipse] was very exciting. I was repeatedly told that this phenomenon is very rare"	28
Characteristic situation	"I hated the kindergarten. I believe that the memory represents three unpleasant years"; "It was one of those typical 'village stories'"	22
Sensory experience	"It was a combination of seeing and feeling"; "It was all these lights in combination with the size of the airport"	18
Joy and play	"I was happy, enjoying myself, together with my friends and parents"; "The wind that was blowing through my hair, while I was riding my bike made me feel free"	15
Change	"[Moving to a new city] was the biggest change in my life"; "It was sort of a turning point in my life"	12
Emotional change	"My feelings switched very quickly from being happy […] to being sad"; "I think it was a mixture of curiosity and fascination, but also being deterred"	4
Other		1
Social relations		89 (Total)
Feeling of security	"I remember having a deep feeling of security in this situation"; "I experienced warmth, care, and love"	22
Characteristic interaction	"My mother and my grandmother were the most important people for me as a child"; "I spent a lot of time with my grandmother in my childhood"	22
Emotionally intense interaction	"It shows the unequal balance of power, which was clearly graspable for me in this situation"; "I could clearly feel my parents' tension and fear"	16
Special interaction	"Back then, my father hardly had any time for me [but on this day, he had]"; "It was the only vacation with both families"	11
Injustice	"I felt alone and I did not understand what was so bad about it"; "I felt misunderstood"	9
Separation	"I thought that we would be separated forever"; "I think it was the first time that I was separated from my parents for a longer period of time"	9
No Meaning	"I would not say that it was an important event"; "In fact, this memory is unimportant and not of the slightest relevance"	3 (Total)

memories' importance and the MEQ-SF are reported in the Supplemental Material. For illustration purposes, we also report two memories and our analysis of their meanings in the Supplemental Material.

2.1 | Age

Three participants did not provide an estimate for their age at the time of their earliest autobiographical memory. The remaining participants' ($N = 179$) average age at the time of their earliest autobiographical memory lay within the expected range ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.32$, 0.83–9.00 years). The vast majority of reported earliest memories were probable memories (i.e., falling between age at encoding of 2 and 5 years; $N = 148$, 82.68%), while only a relatively small number of memories was improbable early (i.e., dating to 2 years and younger; $N = 20$, 11.17%) or improbable late (i.e., age at encoding of 6 or more years, $N = 11$, 6.15%; for the distinction between these three categories, see Akhtar et al., 2018). As the present study is not concerned with the veracity of the memories and their meanings but with the subjective reconstructions of the participants, improbable early and improbable late memories were also included in the analysis.[1]

2.2 | Length of answers to the Open-Ended questions

To get a first impression of the participants' responses to the open-ended questions, we counted the number of words of each answer. Generally speaking, the participants provided quite elaborated descriptions of the memory itself ($M_{Description} = 113.13$, $SD = 70.15$) as well as the meaning when focusing on the moment of experience ($M_{Experience} = 48.99$, $SD = 38.29$) and the meaning for the present life ($M_{Present} = 55.71$, $SD = 40.31$). The length of the answers for the two kinds of meaning did not differ significantly from one another, $t(157) = 1.19$, $p = .237$, $d = 0.09$.

2.3 | Meaning when focusing on the moment of experience

When thinking about the moment of experience, participants reported meanings in which the focus was on the *person* making an experience, meanings in which the characteristics of the *situation* were key, and meanings in which *social relations* played the central role. These categories differed regarding their frequency, $\chi^2(2, N = 323) = 67.34$, $p < .001$. Events that got their meaning from the *situational* characteristics were more frequent than events in which the *social relations*, $\chi^2(1, N = 264) = 28.02$, $p < .001$, or in which the *person* making an experience were key, $\chi^2(1, N = 234) = 57.50$, $p < .001$. Events in which *social relations* played the central role were more frequent than events in which the focus was on the *person* making an experience, $\chi^2(1, N = 148) = 6.08$, $p = .014$. Note that only three participants claimed that they could see no meaning in their earliest autobiographical memory when thinking about the moment of experience. The remaining 179 participants often named more than one potential meaning, leading to a total number of 323 codes in this part of the analysis. The three broad categories—person, situation, and social relation—can be divided into several subcategories (for an overview of the frequencies and examples, see Table 1).

As far as memories are concerned in which the focus was on the *person*, participants claimed that they were meaningful in the moment of experience as they lead them to *personal insights* about life or about the functioning of the world, or as they gave them the feeling of being *autonomous* or *competent* human beings. In addition, participants claimed that the events might have been meaningful as they *represented their personality* and were an example of their typical behavior or, on the contrary, as they captured moments that *contradicted their personality*. Moreover, participants claimed that their earliest memories captured the moment in which they *realized their own individuality* as well as moments in which they felt *approved and special*.

With respect to *situational characteristics*, participants most frequently named *traumatic events*, that is, either physically or psychologically painful situations. Apart from that, participants recalled events that they deemed important because something happened for the *first time* or because something *special* happened that disrupted daily life. However, participants also recalled *characteristic situations* that they assumed to represent recurring aspects of their childhood years. Some memories were deemed meaningful when thinking about the moment of experience because they marked significant *changes* in their lives or moments that involved drastic *emotional changes* (e.g., from a positive to a negative mood). Finally, participants reported situations that they deemed meaningful because they were full of *joy and play* or because they were connected to *intense sensory experiences*.

Events in which *social relations* played the key role involved both positive and negative experiences with others. On the positive side, participants named interactions that gave them a strong *feeling of security*. On the negative side, participants mentioned experiences of *injustice*, that is, of being treated unfairly by other people, as well as being *separated* from loved ones. Apart from that, participants described events that they deemed important when thinking about the moment of experience because of the *emotional intensity* of the interaction, because the interaction was *characteristic* for their relationship with this person or because the interaction was *special*, that is, because the interaction differed from the typical interactions that participants had with this person.

2.4 | Meaning for the present life

The vast majority of participants believed that their earliest autobiographical memory was still meaningful for their present life situation ($N = 159$; 87.4%). In some cases, participants named more than one potential meaning, leading to a total number of 206 codes in this part of the analysis. The reported meanings fell into one of two categories: Participants either felt that the memory pointed to a *similarity or*

continuity between the past and the present or that there was a *contrast* between their past experiences and their present lives.[2] Note that in some cases the meaning for the present life situation involved both a similarity and a contrast. The category of *similarity and continuity* ($N = 172$) was more frequent than the category of *contrast* ($N = 33$), $\chi^2(1, N = 205) = 94.25$, $p < .001$.

On a more specific level and similar to the meanings that participants provided when focusing on the moment of experience, the meanings for the present life either referred to the *person* ($N = 100$), to certain *situations* ($N = 42$) or to the individual's *social relations* ($N = 63$). Again, these categories differed with respect to their frequency, $\chi^2(2, N = 205) = 25.24$, $p < .001$. Meanings for the present life that participants connected to the *person* were more frequent than those that they connected to a *situation*, $\chi^2(1, N = 142) = 23.69$, $p < .001$, or to *social relations*, $\chi^2(1, N = 163) = 8.40$, $p = .004$. In addition, meanings for the present life that participants connected to *social relations* were more frequent than those that they connected to the *situation*, $\chi^2(1, N = 105) = 4.20$, $p = .040$. The subcategories that were identified within these categories are described in the following (for an overview of the frequencies and examples, see Tables 2 and 3 below).

2.4.1 | Similarity and continuity

With respect to the *person*, participants identified *central themes* of their lives, of which they believed that they were already present in the moment of experience and that they accompany them until today. In a similar vein, participants claimed to have similar *personality traits* in the present as in the past. Moreover, participants felt that some *personal insights* that were connected to their earliest autobiographical memory were still valid. In addition, participants reported having similar *preferences* as well as *aversions and fears*, but also *interests and hobbies* in the present moment as in the past. Two participants even saw a continuity between their earliest autobiographical memory and their current *job*.

The similarities that participants identified with respect to the *situation* either had the form of a *continuous* or of a *selective similarity*. That is, the situations described in their earliest autobiographical memories were either situations that regularly reappeared in their

TABLE 2 Meaning for the present life—Similarity and continuity: Category frequencies and examples

Main category	Example	Frequency
Person		88 (Total)
Central theme	"It is important for me to be taken seriously"; "I still feel guilty in many situations, although it is not my responsibility"	21
Personality trait	"I consider myself a […] curious and open-minded person"; "I still am an empathetic person"	19
Personal insight	"I think I will remember this for my own children. It is the small and simple things that can have an immense impact"; "[The experience taught me] to never give up and to have trust"	15
Preferences	"Getting jewelry as a present is still important to me"; "I still like to lie in the grass"	10
Aversions and fears	"I still do not drink any milk today"; "My fear of bees and wasps is related to the situation that I have described"	7
Interests and hobbies	"My interest for astronomy"; "I have been interested in metaphysical topics for a long time, which has lead me to spirituality"	6
Job	"I study textile and clothing technology"; "My job has a lot to do with technology"	2
Other		8
Situation		32 (Total)
Continuous similarity	"When visiting my parents' house, I still feel secure. […] Home is a place of safety and security"; "I love Christmas"	18
Selective similarity	"In the last months, I have spent a lot of time in my parents' house […]. […] This has certainly brought back memories"; "I have been quite depressed lately. […] One could probably see similarities between the physical pain back then and the inner pain that I feel now"	14
Social relations		52 (Total)
Positive	"The relation to my father is something very special and is becoming stronger through the course of my life"; "[My older brother] has never only been an older brother, but a second father to me"	27
Negative	"I think that it represents the harshness that my father had"; "Probably […] this example represents the lack of love from my father"	15
Neutral	"[The relationship with my brother] is still rather distanced, but if something happened to him, I would still help him"	1
Other		9

TABLE 3 Meaning for the present life—Contrast: Category frequencies and examples

Main category	Example	Frequency
Person		12 (total)
Positive development	"Back then, I still had heavy problems with self-worth and self-love"; "My self-esteem was very low. I had to build it up and I have done so very well"	8
Negative development	"I am afraid of being judged. I find it fantastic that I did not care back then"; "As a child I had absolutely no lack of [self-esteem] […]. I would like to have more of it again"	4
Situation		10 (Total)
Desire for childhood	"Back then as a child, the world was still in order"; "I think I miss the old times, the lightheartedness, that one did not have to take care of anything"	6
Other		4
Social relations		11 (Total)
Positive development	"Today, I have hardly any competitive thoughts with respect to my brother anymore"	4
Negative development	"In my family, nothing is like it used to be. […] On that day, everything was all right"; "Recently, I do unfortunately not spend that much time with my grandmother anymore"	5
Evolving positive development	"I am still in the process of letting go"	2

lives and continued to be important (*continuous similarity*) or situations that participants were able to connect to their current life without there being this life-long continuity (*selective similarity*).

Finally, the observation that a *social relation* described in the earliest autobiographical memory is similar to a present social relation could mean either that a *positive* relation persisted or that a negative *relation* persisted. In one case, a participant described a similarity that was neither clearly positive nor clearly negative.

2.4.2 | Contrast

The contrasts that participants identified with respect to their own *person* were the result of either a *positive* or a *negative development*. In other words, participants believed that they had overcome personal struggles and weaknesses that were present in the moment of their earliest autobiographical memory (*positive development*) or that they had lost a strength or personality trait that they used to have (*negative development*).

The *situational* contrast that participants experienced between the past and the present was mostly driven by a *desire for childhood*. For these participants, the childhood experience that was captured in their earliest autobiographical memory represented a lost paradise that they would like to have back.

Participants who saw a contrast between social relations in the past and in the present referred to either a *positive development* (i.e., the improvement of certain social relations) or a *negative development* (i.e., certain social relations becoming worse). In addition, participants reported cases in which the positive development had not been completed yet (*evolving positive development*).

3 | DISCUSSION

Earliest autobiographical memories represent the first of the few moments from our early years of life that we still remember as adults. Moreover, earliest autobiographical memories mark a potential beginning of the stories that we tell ourselves and others about our lives in order to achieve a sense of coherence and purpose (e.g., McAdams & McLean, 2013). Surprisingly, however, the meaning of earliest autobiographical memories has only been investigated to a limited degree in recent empirical research. In particular, there is no comprehensive overview of the different kinds of meaning that individuals ascribe to their earliest autobiographical memories from an adult perspective. Against this background, participants of the present study were asked to describe the meaning that they see in these memories when focusing on the moment of experience and when thinking about their present life situation.

As our results demonstrate, participants believed that the events that they remembered had already been meaningful in the moment of experience. That is, the events that the adult participants recalled as their earliest autobiographical memories were typically described as events that stood out from everyday life, which is in line with previous research on the content of earliest autobiographical memories (McAdams, 2013; Usher & Neisser, 1993). On the other hand, participants felt able to identify references between their earliest autobiographical memory and their present life situation, which seems to support the Adlerian notion that earliest memories tell us something about the individual's style of life and important biographical themes. The meanings provided by the participants were systematized by sorting them into three broad categories: the remembered events were meaningful because they said something about the *person* who had made the experience, because they possessed distinct *situational characteristics* or because they captured important aspects of certain *social relations*. Regarding this finding, two aspects need to be emphasized. First, each of these three categories encompassed several subcategories that mirrored vastly different experiences and meanings: Albeit sharing some overarching commonalities, the earliest autobiographical memories of different people tell very different stories. Second, the subcategories identified for the meaning in the moment of

experience differed substantially from the subcategories identified for the meaning for one's present life, indicating that participants were indeed able to distinguish between the two kinds of meaning.

When thinking and reasoning about the moment of experience, the meanings identified by the participants were more often related to situational characteristics than to social relations. At the same time, meanings related to social relations were mentioned more frequently than meanings related to the person who made the experience. Put differently, when thinking about the moment of experience, the participants' focus was on the remembered experience itself rather than on how this experience was connected to social relations or to the person who had made the experience. However, the kinds of situational characteristics that the participants described as making the experience meaningful were quite heterogeneous. While the most frequently mentioned category were traumatic events, for instance, most memories were not traumatic in nature, which fits with previous findings (Kihlstrom & Harackiewicz, 1982; Peterson et al., 2005). Apart from that, participants frequently mentioned turning points and transitional events (cf. McAdams, 2013), such as things happening for the first time, events that disrupted the typical course of everyday life or that resulted in a fundamental change.

With respect to the meaning for one's present life situation, the identified meanings were more often related to the person who remembered the experience than to social relations. At the same time, meanings related to social relations were mentioned more frequently than meanings related to situational characteristics. In other words, when thinking about the meaning that one's earliest autobiographical memory has for one's present life situation, the key question seems to be what this memory tells about the person beyond the immediate context of the remembered event. Apart from that, the meaning was more frequently associated with continuity than with contrast. This is particularly interesting, as the construction of a coherent and continuous life narrative is believed to contribute to a sense of unity (McAdams, 2001; Singer, 2004). Note, however, that the instruction to think about references between their earliest autobiographical memory and their present lives may have made it easier for participants to construct meanings that pointed towards continuity than meanings that pointed towards contrast. To investigate this, future studies could explicitly encourage participants to think about a possible contrast between then and now. Note also that in the present study both continuity and contrast could have either a positive or a negative meaning: continuity does not necessarily imply that a positive aspect of one's childhood days is still present today, but can also refer to negatively connoted continuity, such as a constantly bad relationship with one's parents. Similarly, a contrast can denote both a positive and a negative development.

Although participants successfully distinguished between the two kinds of meaning, it seems important to re-emphasize a point that was already discussed in the introduction: Both kinds of meaning do not provide an account of "how things really were" or "how things really are." Earliest autobiographical memories do not have an objective meaning. Quite the contrary, the way participants construct and reconstruct these meanings are examples of autobiographical reasoning in the life story and reflect the individual's life circumstances and current understanding of self (cf. Conway & Loveday, 2015). In the context of the present study, one obvious example for this is that the meanings that participants provided when focusing on the moment of experience were sometimes intermixed with retrospective judgments. For instance, being able to claim that an interaction with another person was characteristic for the interactions that one has had with this person requires knowledge that extends beyond the immediate moment of experience. Rather than being a weakness of the study, however, this nicely illustrates the complexities of narrative identity and the processes of meaning-making that lead to the formation of narrative identity. It also demonstrates that autobiographical events can often only be understood in connection to other autobiographical events (cf. Bluck & Habermas, 2001) and that earliest autobiographical memories can provide a rich basis for exploring the individual's life story.

Nevertheless, there are three limitations to be noted. First, it seems plausible to assume that both the content and the meaning of earliest autobiographical memories crucially depend on the societal circumstances in which an individual grows up. Hence, at least the frequency of the categories could look differently in different countries or at different times of history. As the study was conducted in a "weird" country (Germany; see Henrich et al., 2010), it is important to compare the obtained patterns with the patterns in non-weird countries in future research. Second, the same line of reasoning also applies to potential effects of gender. The majority of participants in the present study was female. As gender still influences the way individuals grow up and live in society, systematically investigating how gender influences the content and meaning of earliest childhood memories seems an interesting topic for future investigations.

Third, most participants were young adults between 18 and 30 years of age. As different generations make different experiences, investigating potential cohort effects could potentially be interesting. In addition, it seems plausible to assume that individuals in different stages of life focus on different aspects in their life narratives (Fivush et al., 2017; Köber et al., 2015), which may in turn influence the interpretation of their earliest childhood memories. In fact, and as already mentioned in the introduction, there are studies demonstrating that the meanings provided for earliest autobiographical memories coincide with the current developmental tasks and that they may change when these developmental tasks change (Josselson, 2000; Kroger, 1990; Orlofsky & Frank, 1986). Importantly, there is not only a connection between developmental tasks and the meaning of earliest childhood memories in particular but between developmental tasks and autobiographical memory in general (Conway & Holmes, 2004; McLean & Pasupathi, 2012). Against this background, further investigating the role that earliest autobiographical memories play within the overall life story might be an interesting topic for future research.

Overall, however, the present study provides a comprehensive overview of the meanings that humans ascribe to their earliest autobiographical memories. By doing so, the study also demonstrates that these memories contain themes and observations that one can relate to up until adulthood. Although more research is needed to gain deeper insights into the meaning of earliest autobiographical memories, the present study allows several important conclusions regarding the research questions

outlined in the introduction. To begin with, individuals indeed see meaning in their earliest autobiographical memories and are able to distinguish the meaning in the moment of experience from the meaning for their present lives. Despite the fact that both kinds of meaning are the result of autobiographical reasoning processes that are driven by the individual's current understanding of self, they are centered around different themes. While the meanings that participants provided when focusing on the moment of experience were most frequently associated with situational characteristics, the meanings for the present life situation were most frequently related to aspects of the memory that told something about the person beyond the immediate context of the remembered event. Moreover, these meanings for the present life situation were more frequently associated with continuity than with a contrast between then and now, which seems to indicate that participants interpreted the memories in a way that supported the construction of a coherent and continuous story (cf. McAdams, 2001; Singer, 2004). However, we also found considerable interindividual variation, demonstrating that the specific content and meaning of earliest autobiographical memories seem to depend on various contextual factors. Hence, the present study provides a valuable starting point for exploring the role of earliest autobiographical memories within the individual life narrative. Human beings are storytellers—and the stories that we tell also include those early "flashes in the dark" (Draaisma, 2012), which we still remember as adults.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

ENDNOTES

[1] Note also that the categorization as "improbable early" could be questioned itself. As cross-sectional and prospective research has demonstrated, "it seems likely that many people's earliest memories are earlier than they believe them to be" (Peterson, 2020, p. 128; see also Wang et al., 2019). This finding makes the seemingly "improbable early" memories appear less improbable.

[2] Note that one participant reported a meaning that the authors felt unable to sort in one of the categories, as the participant provided too little background information. Therefore, the total number of codes reported in Tables 2 and 3 (205) is not identical with the total number of codes in this part of the analysis.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data are available upon reasonable request from the authors.

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