

# Self-defining Memories in the System of Self-Memory Interfunctional Relationships

Veronika V. Nurkova

Lomonosov Moscow State University, Moscow, Russia

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3117-3081>, e-mail: [Nourkova@mail.ru](mailto:Nourkova@mail.ru)

The aim of this paper is to extend the field of research in cultural-historical psychology by assimilating the construct of self-defining autobiographical memories (SDMs), which are in high demand among cognitive psychologists of personality. On the one hand, SDMs reflect one's core motivation, personal traits, and leading goals. On the other hand, SDMs serve as a means of forming a sense of personal identity and continuity within one's individual history. In the literature review, evidence supporting the SDM construct's validity was critically appraised through the lenses of individual differences, correlations with other variables, clinical cases, and experimental results on causal links between SDM transformation and various measures of personality. The Self-Memory System model (SMS), which connects autobiographical memory and the self, is discussed as a pertinent framework for interpreting SDM's unique properties. The argument ends with the proposition that the cultural-historical approach would benefit from accommodating SDMs as an ideal mediator of interfunctional relationships, both inside personality and between personality and cognitive processes.

**Keywords:** self-defining memories, autobiographical memory, self-memory system, personality, interfunctional relationships, psychological system.

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## Самоопределяющие автобиографические воспоминания в системе личностно-мнемических межфункциональных связей

В.В. Нуркова

Московский государственный университет имени М.В. Ломоносова (ФГБОУ ВО «МГУ имени М.В. Ломоносова»), Российская академия народного хозяйства и государственной службы при Президенте РФ (ФГБОУ ВО «РАНХиГС»), г. Москва, Российская Федерация

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3117-3081>, e-mail: [Nourkova@mail.ru](mailto:Nourkova@mail.ru)

Целью данной статьи является расширение номенклатуры психологических явлений, анализируемых в контексте методологии культурно-исторического подхода, за счет ассимиляции крайне востребованного в зарубежной когнитивной психологии личности конструкта самоопределяющих воспоминаний (СОВ). СОВ представляют собой специфическую категорию автобиографических воспоминаний. С одной стороны, СОВ являются отражением ядерной мотивации личности, ее устойчивых черт и ведущих целей. С другой стороны, СОВ выступают средствами формирования идентичности и преемственности личной истории. В обзоре литературы доказательства, подтверждающие значимость конструкта СОВ, критически рассматриваются через призму индивидуальных различий, корреляций с другими психологическими переменными, клинических случаев и экспериментальных данных о причинно-следственных зависимостях между изменением СОВ и различ-

ными аспектами функционирования личности. Модель самореференционной мнемической системы, связывающая автобиографическую память и личность, обсуждается в качестве наиболее адекватной теоретической рамки для интерпретации уникальных характеристик СОВ. В заключение статьи обосновывается, что для развития культурно-исторического подхода продуктивен анализ СОВ как идеального средства выстраивания межфункциональных связей внутри подсистем личности, а также между личностью и когнитивными процессами.

**Ключевые слова:** самоопределяющие воспоминания, автобиографическая память, самореференционная мнемическая система, личность, межфункциональные связи, психологическая система.

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### **The Problem of Mutual Mediation of the Higher Mental Functions**

Vygotsky defined the notion of the “psychological system” as “the complex connections that develop between different functions in the process of development” [3, p. 110]. This notion constitutes the theoretical core of cultural-historical psychology. The holistic psychological system is continually updated by acquiring new, higher mental functions (HMFs). The newly-acquired HMF integrates into the existing system by building inter-functional relationships, which together cope with new tasks, overcoming the initial call to a cultural practice that stood at the beginning of learning.

The idea that one psychological function, when involved in a “system of cooperating functions” [5, p. 16], can serve as a means of implementing the other was embodied by Vygotsky in the example of the intellectualization of memory in ontogeny. He wrote, “What is absorbed directly by memory in direct remembering is absorbed in mediated remembering with the aid of several mental operations that may have nothing in common with memory itself. What we find here, then, might be viewed as a substitution of certain mental functions for others.” [4, pp. 392, 394]. Yet another even more radical case refers to the integration of thinking and speech, with the result that “at a certain point, the two lines cross: thinking becomes verbal and speech intellectual.” [4, p. 105].

Vygotsky formulated the possibility of psychological systems employing the products of HMFs as an ideal means of regulating other HMFs. One case of the above-described inter-functional relationships is the “Kaffir dream” [3, p.117], where the dreamer actively uses his dream to solve a daily problem that has been postponed until the dream provides the correct an-

swer. Vygotsky assigned great importance to this line of research. He emphasized it both publicly – “systems and their fate – it seems to me that for us the alpha and omega of our next work must reside in these four words” [3, p. 131], and in private notes – “the basis of concrete psychology – a relationship of the type: ‘the dream of the Kaffir.’” [6, p. 59].

To date, specific forms of inter-functional cooperation remain insufficiently explicated and, therefore, are under-investigated. Further research is needed to identify psychological systems allowing the self-regulation of one’s own mental activity and behavior (“auto-stimulation” in Vygotsky’s terms), which operate as the interaction of high-level personal-cognitive functions. The present study is based on the research program proposed earlier in the framework of the cultural-historical psychology of autobiographical memory [10]. Below, I transpose the idea of mediating inter-functional connections to a new class of HMF. The purpose of this study is to analyze self-defining autobiographical memories (SDM) as an ideal means of structuring and regulating personality.

### **The Construct of “Self-defining” Autobiographical Memories in Contemporary Cognitive Psychology of Personality**

Although Singer introduced the term “self-defining autobiographical memories” (SDM) [51], the idea of a specific projective category of personal memories can be traced back to the framework of Adler’s theory [1]. Like subsequent representatives of the psychoanalytic approach [40], Adler considered early childhood memories to be the most informative for understanding adult personality. According to this view, the poor

memory traces of distant experiences, combined with their minimum verifiability, make these memories optimal materials for the projection of lifestyle and enduring concerns.

However, in contrast to the psychoanalytic tradition, Singer objected to limiting SDM to childhood memories and emphasized the active role of consciousness in SDM formation and retrieval [49]. Accordingly, the standard procedure of SDM assessment implies a direct request to describe a memory that expresses the core of one's personality [46]. Typically participants are instructed to select those memories: (1) whose temporal distance from the present is at least 12 months (to be sure that they are integrated into autobiographical memory); (2) that evoke strong feelings, either positive or negative (to indicate the relevance to actual motivation); (3) that can be vividly represented (to experience subjective confidence); (4) that have been thought about many times (to indicate the inclusion in the psychological repertoire); and (5) that connect to other events on similar themes (to access the top position in the "semantic bunch" of autobiographical memories, see for details 9).

The authors use a set of slightly different procedures in search of memories manifesting the "true self," keeping the similar presumption of subjective control over selecting adequate mnemonic content. For instance, Hess [27] asked participants to imagine a mental photo album holding the few most important shots. Correspondingly, McDarby and colleagues [36] asked for memories that were considered representative after their own deaths.

SDMs are endowed with outstanding psychological phenomena. Researchers dealing with SDMs consider them as a unit of personality, combining personal traits and goals that intervein with each other through semantic links. These units can provide sufficient material for understanding personality.

In light of Silvan Tomkins' script theory [54], SDMs are scripts generalized from a series of similar life experiences, where affective amplification between basic emotions and the target objects is always a feature. The list of possible target objects and the exact emotions associated with them were not predefined and were revealed inductively for each case.

Following Tomkins's theory, Demorest [21] identified a taxonomy of emotion-eliciting SDM plots. She performed a hierarchical cluster analysis of SDMs associated with love, joy, sadness, anger, and fear, resulting in 12 categories of events. The major ones derived from the cluster analysis included affiliation, accomplishment, fun, physical challenge, the unknown, trauma, harm to the loved ones, separation from the loved ones, romantic break-up, failed expectations, let down by others, and

cruelty. Although each category may be linked to any emotion, emotion-eliciting events could be grouped by frequent associations being stable at the one-month retest [22]. Thorne and McLean [53] reduced the variety of SDM themes into the categories of 1) relationship, 2) achievement/mastery, 3) recreation/exploration, 4) life-threatening events, and 5) guilt/shame. This minimal classification is now the most popular in coding SDM content, although in my opinion, it leads to missing important nuances of personal meaning.

Among the other discussed characteristics of SDM are the degree of specificity, emotional valence indicating progress in goal achievement, and meaning-making (autobiographical reasoning), which explicitly reveals the connection between the retrieved episode and one's personality [48; 26].

Pasupathi et al. [45] empirically found four possible self-event relations in SDM narratives: 1) explaining or illustrating the vital traits of personality by SDM experience (explain); 2) framing of personality through self-contradictory narrative, when narrated SDM at first evokes trivial implication and then dismissed this implication (dismissal); 3) expressing how experiences had changed one's sense of self (cause); and 4) revealing a previously possessed, but unrecognized, quality (reveal). While both "explain" and "dismiss" relations support a stable diachronic sense of self, "cause" and "reveal" links express a change in the self.

McLean and Fournier [38], building on McAdams' three-level model of personality [34], drew a distinction between three self-event connections in SDMs. According to McAdams' theory, personality comprises three levels: traits, adaptations, and life stories, which together constitute narrative identity. Similarly, the authors linked dispositional SDM connections to trait levels. They referred to value/outlook connections, focusing on morality, beliefs, and general attitudes toward the world, to the level of adaptation. Finally, personal growth connections represent the entire life story.

McAdams [35] differentiated the two types of plots in SDM. The first, the redemption sequence in SDMs, is a narrative form with a disadvantaged situation at the outset, leading to a positive outcome. Second, the contamination sequence is a narrative form with an advantageous situation at the outset, leading to a negative outcome. Notably, more complicated plots, e.g. the "double redemption" or the "double contamination," are still overlooked in the studies on SDMs.

Lardi and colleagues [29] attempted to find correspondence between the numerous parameters of SDMs mentioned above. Employing the k-means cluster analysis method, they revealed two contrasting profiles of

SDMs. Participants with the first profile generated general redemptive SDMs including meaning-making passages. Participants with the second profile described episodic-like SDMs involving fewer meaning-making passages and fewer themes of conflict. Appreciating their efforts, I would state that it is still much to learn how these profiles match personal, cognitive, and behavioral individual differences.

Another significant gap in SDM studies is the SDM-motivation link. One may suppose that thematic and formal diversity in SDMs reflect a highly complex and heterarchical motivation structure. In contrast, a monotonous repertoire of SDMs mirrors the poor hierarchical structure of motivation. As participants are typically asked to provide a fixed number of SDMs, no data are available to examine this hypothesis.

### **SDMs in Perspective of Differential and Development Psychology**

The correlational approach indicated a list of significant relationships between the most commonly coded SDM features (e.g., affect, structure, meaning, and content) and personality characteristics and behavioral variables. Relevant researchers have detected these relationships, in both general and specific populations.

Blagov et al. [14] linked SDM features to the five-factor model domains and revealed the following correlations: neuroticism positively correlates to negative affect and overgenerality in conjunction with the contamination plot of SDM; extraversion positively linked to positive affect and meaning-making; conscientiousness positively links to high specificity; and agreeableness positively links to positive affect. Yet another study demonstrated the link between openness to latitude and volume of associative links of SDMs [29]. Notably, the authors operationalized openness not only by the questionnaire but also by measuring behavioral responses to viewing emotionally disturbing videos.

The studies identified a specific combination of SDM characteristics predicting psychopathological outcomes, which I coined as “negative quadriad.” It combines low scores for specificity, positivity, meaning-making, and addressing personal achievements/mastery. The “negative quadriad” was detected in drug addicts [25], alcoholics, and patients with an asocial personality disorder. It was shown that the “negative quadriad” conjoins with a tendency to retrieve SDMs from early childhood (which may refer to infantilism) [30]. Alcohol addicts complement the “negative quadriad” by exuberant emotions and focus on interpersonal relationships [20, 41]. This pattern

seems to disclose the frustration of affiliation motivation and striving to compensate for event deficits during the alcohol abuse period through childhood memories [2; 12]. I would propose that narrative meaning-making operates as an independent component of the “negative quadriad.” Presumably, it reflects a way of approaching core personal concerns. In accordance with this hypothesis, decreased levels of specificity and positive affect were observed in participants with anorexia nervosa. Meanwhile, anorexic participants focused their meaning-making process and contamination plots on life-threatening events, illnesses, and sexual abuse [15].

There is substantial interest in age-relevant differences in SDMs. Although no studies have examined premature forms of SDMs, it is clear that SDMs originate from parent-child dialogue scaffolding causal relationships between experiences and personality [8; 24]. When involving a child in this kind of dialogue on a regular basis, parents establish a prerequisite for the autobiographical (i.e., individual-historical) aspect of adult consciousness [42].

In its extended form, SDM develops in adolescence, responding to the age-related task of identity achievement [39]. Teenage SDMs typically involve mixed emotions related to the recent past, focusing on personal relationships, first-time experiences, and achievements. These qualities correspond to the leading tasks in adolescence [56].

SDMs change their functions at different stages of human life. As people age, SDMs acquire the highest importance as a resource for resisting age-associated deficits in positive self-identity and narrowing the repertoire of social roles. SDMs have become an essential tool for the diachronic integration of the self. Accordingly, the SDM content in the elderly turns to the distant past with an emphasis on the stability and continuity of personality throughout the life path, while the SDMs of the student population focus on the dynamics of personal changes [37; 50]. Notably, in contrast to the phenomenological reduction of ordinary memories in aging, SDMs maintain a pure and rich phenomenology of mental re-experiencing and time travel, even if they address the very distant past [32].

### **Self-defining Memories in the M. Conway’ Self-Memory System Model**

The Self-Memory System model [SMS, 18, 19], which conceptually links autobiographical memory and personality, proposes room for SDM phenomena. The SMS model implies the dynamic interaction of

two structures: the long-term self and the working self. While the working self deals with situational strivings, the long-term self scaffolds a consistent understanding of oneself across the entire lifespan, making possible coherence of personal plans in the long term. Because the interaction between these two may be either congruent or competitive, this model adopts the possibility of dialectic tension.

According to the SMS model, the long-term self consists of an autobiographical knowledge base and a conceptual self, containing self-concept, self-esteem, and values. The autobiographical knowledge base (autobiographical memory) has a hierarchical organization, with the top level of the life story as a whole. Then, the life story is split into life themes (stages, chapters) at a more concrete level. These life themes, in turn, are the top nodes for the lower level of general events, exemplified by numerous life incidents. I should emphasize that these life incidents are phenotypically similar to episodic memories but, in fact, just mimic them (see details on the episodic memory system, that is, a temporal storage of experiences, 9). An episodic record is assigned to be copied into the autobiographical knowledge base only upon selection by both the working and conceptual selves. In contrast to fragile episodic memories that decay in the short term, copies of episodic records that integrate into the autobiographical knowledge base become immune to forgetting. However, SMS claims that the veracity of autobiographical memories is an illusion. Motivation modifies the initial episodic traces at the re-encoding stage to the autobiographical knowledge base, and then at each retrieval stage. Moreover, the autobiographical knowledge base is updated not only by episodic traces of experiences, but also by imagination and future thoughts. Consequently, imagined events may acquire the status of reality [13].

SDMs participate in this model as a specific type of autobiographical memory that directly explicates the conceptual self into consciousness, while having all the features of ordinary incidental memories (life incidents). Therefore, SDMs are subjectively authentic, not so much referring to a specific past event as serving as a metaphor for actual values and motives [47]. In support of this view, Charlesworth et al. [16] demonstrated the elongation of the list of self-descriptive adjectives and an increase in scores on self-concept clarity after performing the SDM task.

SDM may be seen as the basis (lowest point) of a vertical semantic axis penetrating all levels of the autobiographical knowledge base. Thus, it represents the shortest retrieval path among a life story, life chapters, general events, and specific incidents. Consequently,

reflecting on SDM evokes thinking in terms of higher-semantic categories. At the same time, recollecting SDM makes other, chronologically-adjacent ordinary personal memories more accessible and, in this way, activates autobiographical memory as a whole system.

In summary, the SMS model employs SDM as a means of communication between personality structures. Figure 1 presents the SMS model, including the SDM.

### **Self-defining Memories as a Means of Self-regulation, Self-cognition, and Self-construction**

Looking through the lenses of the cultural-historical approach, it is important to stress that SDMs not only inform about the current state of personality, but also actively influence various psychological processes. This idea has been examined in three lines of research: 1) clinical cases of recruiting SDM in psychotherapy, 2) correlational data, and 3) experimental studies with SDM as the independent variable and personality changes as the dependent variable.

The first line of the research involves case studies. For instance, Singer and colleagues [47] described the case of client W., who entered psychotherapy because of significant relational difficulties originating in his impulsive self-destructive behavior. At the outset of therapy, W produced overgeneral SDMs with no meaning making or autobiographical reasoning. These SDMs focused on negative experiences such as his parents' divorce and his sister's death from cancer. The progress in W. therapy consisting of learning to control impulsive actions was found to be associated with an increase in SDM specificity and meaning-making.

In the logic of the second line of the research, Dunlop and Tracy [23] showed that autobiographical reasoning in the SDMs of members of Alcoholics Anonymous serves as a predictor of the duration of alcohol abstinence. Liao et al. [31] noticed a significant relationship between the proportion of positive SDMs (when instructed to recall three memories) with the tendency to give "upward" interpretations of events and evaluate them as highly functional. Correspondingly, the self-reported functionality of SDMs, together with active meaning-making in the process of narration, predicted a high level of self-esteem at a one-year delay. In this regard, it can be concluded that people who are generally satisfied with their life stories tend to use SDMs for introspection, building positive self-concepts. Thomsen et al. [52] showed that the anxiety (but not depressive symptoms), measured

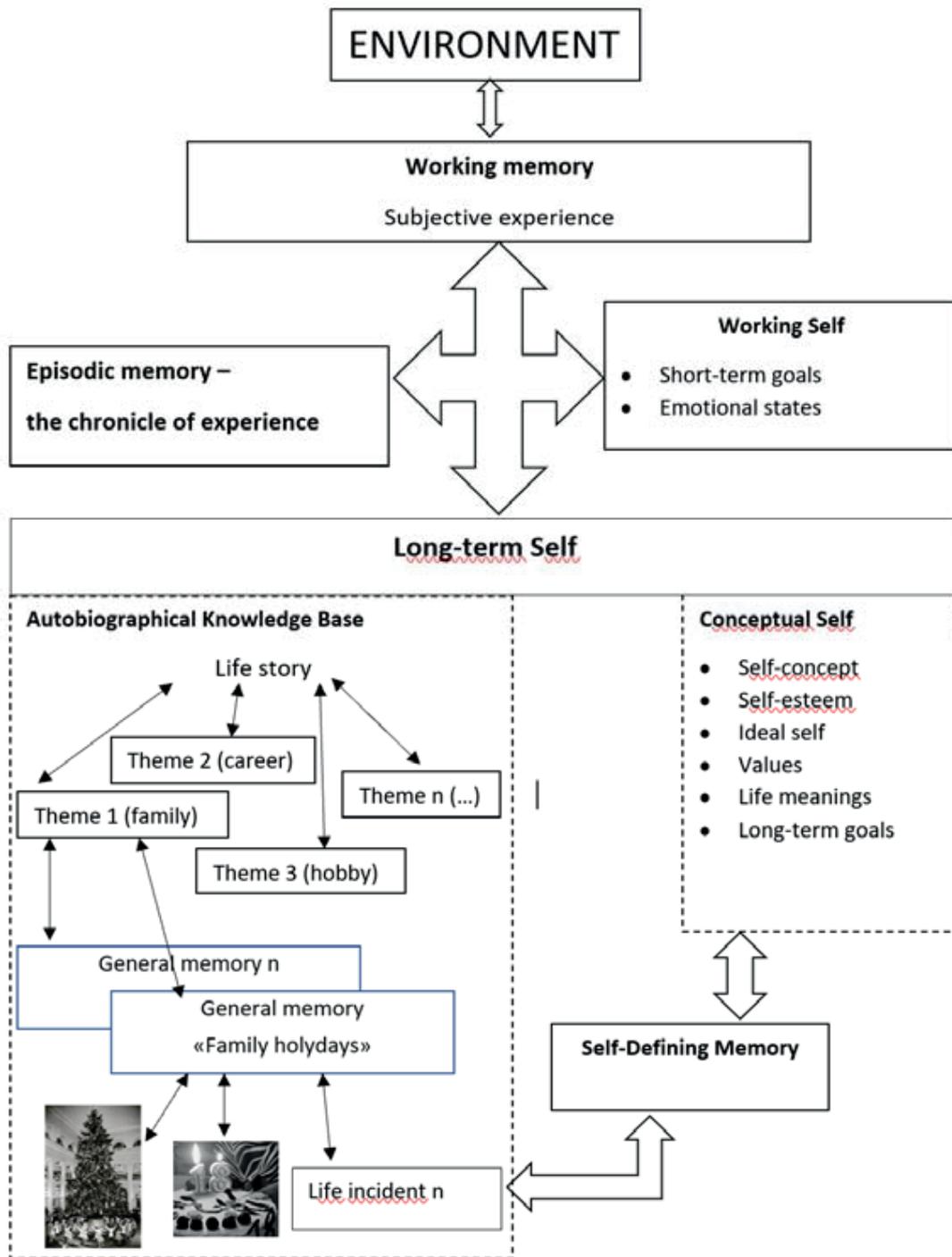


Fig. 1. The conceptual Self-Memory System model

10 years prior to the study, predicted negative emotional saturation and the number of “downwards” interpretive patterns in SDMs, which, in turn, predicted the depressive symptoms at the time of assessment. The authors argue for a causal linkage between contaminative negative SDMs and the aggravation of depressive symptoms.

In contrast to the substantial body of clinical cases and correlational research, there are few experimental data on the causal relationship between SDMs and personality.

In one study [55], participants improved their mood after recalling SDMs, which illustrated the positive aspects of self-concepts. This mood-repair effect was observed after viewing a sad video and did not depend on the type of instruction (focus on episodic details versus focus on rational reflection). However, only non-depressed participants achieved this effect. The authors explained it in the light of the SMS model. According to their interpretation, in non-depressive participants, deliberate retrieval of SDM activated the relevant as-

pects of self-concept, which generated positive affective responses that overcame the external triggers of negative emotions. Depression objects to this mechanism in at least two ways. First, the depressive state blurred SDM's phenomenology, provoking a third-person narrative perspective. Therefore, the SDMs in participants with depression were less self-suggestive. Second, quite unexpectedly, the authors considered the null result positive. They built on previous studies that showed that pessimistic mood induction typically engages depressive participants in a circle of ruminations, triggering continuous mood worsening. If so, no mood worsening in depressive participants was taken as employment of SDMs for coping with negative mood induction.

A research group from Southampton University [17] reported a positive effect of the "imagery rescripting" applied to negative SDMs. They detected an increase in self-esteem and a decrease in anxiety one week after the procedure consisting of guided "re-experience" of negative SDM from the perspective of the present day and constructing a dialogue between the participant imagining herself inside the event and in the present.

Building on the theoretical assumption that trait anxiety results from an overabundant discrepancy between ideal and actual selves [33], we empirically tested the hypothesis that trait anxiety can be controlled by enriching the repertoire of available positive SDMs relevant to the most frustrated self-esteem parameters [44].

In our study, high-anxious participants deliberately constructed positive SDMs while experiencing an altered state of consciousness. It was induced by sensorimotor psychosynthesis, a type of Eriksonian non-directive hypnosis. The participants selected SDMs consisting of scenes that were most threatening for their positive self-esteem and then transformed these scenes in a self-enhancing manner. In two control conditions, the participants experienced an altered state of consciousness without reference to SDMs or discussed their concerns with the research assistant. The results revealed a decrease in trait anxiety (assessed by Taylor scale and an objective test of the assessment of time intervals) four months after the experimental intervention exclusively in the target group, proving that acquisition of reconstructed SDMs may affect self-concept.

### **The Perspective of Self-defining Memory Research in Cultural-Historical Approach**

In one previously published paper, I have drawn a distinction between two lines of further development

of the cultural-historical approach, termed as "concentrating" and "generalizing" [11]. The adoption of SDM in the research agenda seems beneficial for both lines seems beneficial for both lines, complementing its essential theoretical provisions with new empirical data and promoting further integration of cultural-historical psychology into world science.

The "concentrating" line involves the analysis of SDM as a mediator in forming special inter-functional connections of the "Kaffir dream" type, both between personality subsystems and between personality and cognitive processes. In this vein, SDMs should be considered as specific autobiographical memories mediating other HMFs (self-concept, temporal perspective, voluntary control over motivation, etc.) that help understand the progress of HMF upon internalization. In this context, the most relevant research questions refer to SDM's functions, ideal forms, scaffolding cultural tools, and social practices. Moreover, considering the developmental potential of cultural mediation, it is possible to propose a perspective of "humanitarian technologies" for the qualitative optimization of SDM functioning, including the context of digitalization.

The potential of the "generalizing" line of focusing on SDMs consists of applying cultural-historical methodology for resolving some contradictions and filling gaps now present in the cognitive psychology of SDMs.

Among such prospective growth points for SDM theory is, for example, the age-related development of SDMs, including the potential for functional progress in the elderly. Through the lenses of cultural-historical theory, SDMs are structural reference points that hold on to the unity of diachronic selves. Therefore, it is worth examining SDM's involvement in internalized communication in the hierarchy of self-identities, both synchronically and diachronically [8].

The cultural-historical perspective toward SDM puts a range of novel questions at the forefront. For example, is the functional potential of SDMs limited to motivation, or is it possible to expand their functionality to cognitive tasks? Do different modes of narrating SDMs (e.g., associative or reflexive) determine how they operate in the SMS system? Can SDMs exist in non-narrative forms, such as "mental photographs," that is, symbolic photo-like representations of meaning-making acts [10]? Is it possible to recruit SDMs to evoke altered states of consciousness, such as "compressed life review" known to be a part of extreme experiences of the phenomenon "the whole life flashed before my eyes" [7; 43]? Considering the breadth and novelty of the tasks facing SDM researchers, I insist that full-scale work in this field has just commenced.

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### Information about the authors

Veronika V. Nourkova, Doctor of Science (Psychology), Professor of the Faculty of Psychology, Lomonosov Moscow State University, Senior researcher, Institute for Social Sciences, RANEPa, Moscow, Russia, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3117-3081>, e-mail: [Nourkova@mail.ru](mailto:Nourkova@mail.ru)

### Информация об авторах

Нуркова Вероника Валерьевна, доктор психологических наук, профессор факультета психологии, Московский государственный университет имени М.В. Ломоносова (ФГБОУ ВО «МГУ имени М.В. Ломоносова»), ведущий научный сотрудник Школы антропологии будущего Института социальных наук, Российская академия народного хозяйства и государственной службы при Президенте РФ (ФГБОУ ВО «РАНХиГС»), г. Москва, Российская Федерация, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3117-3081>, e-mail: [Nourkova@mail.ru](mailto:Nourkova@mail.ru)

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