

Remembering in Someone Else's Shoes: Vicarious Memory and Empathy

Vicarious memories (VMs) are “recollections people have of salient life episodes that were told to them by another person” (Pillemer et al., 2015, p. 234). Unlike episodic memories (EMs) of one's personal past, VMs are formed through conversation, written narratives, or social media sharing (Thomsen et al., 2025). Recent psychological research has shown that VMs share core phenomenological qualities with EMs—vivid mental imagery, emotional intensity, and similar physical reactions—and play similar adaptive roles in identity formation, self-understanding, and decision-making (Pillemer et al., 2015; Pond and Peterson, 2020; Panattoni and Thomsen, 2018).

Despite growing psychological interest, VMs have received little philosophical attention. The phenomenon raises interesting questions: How does the sense of reliving differ when we remember an event we witnessed versus receiving testimony about it? How does this affect the sense of self in VM? Do VMs involve some sort of autoeisis?

In this paper, we argue that we can better understand the intensity of VMs, the emotional charge they carry, and their adaptive roles if we consider the encoding stage of VMs not simply involving testimony or communication, but (also) an act of empathy.

Traditional accounts of empathy—whether theory-theory, simulation theory, or direct perception theory—focus primarily on empathizing with another person's current mental states during direct interaction, such as understanding their movements, behaviors, gestures, expressions, emotions, and actions (Gallagher, 2020). Memory, however, is a higher-order mental state compared to these directly observable phenomena. When we encode someone else's memory, we are not witnessing the original event itself (which occurred in their past, before our encoding), but rather we empathize with another person through her testimony or narrative about that event.

We build on Edith Stein's phenomenological account of empathy to shed light on the form of empathy that is involved in VM's encoding stage. For Stein, empathy proceeds in three steps: (1) emerging awareness of another's mental state, (2) “fulfilling explication”, where we are drawn into this state, and (3) comprehensive objectification of the mental state (Stein 1989, p. 19). The second phase is imaginative and it plays a crucial role: we join the other's perspective by imaginatively adopting their standpoint (Dullstein 2013). We “co-live” the other's experience, being guided by their perspective while remaining aware that this mental state is not primordially our own—it possesses “co-originality” (*Konoriginalität*). The imaginative second phase allows us to transcend perceptual awareness and enter the other's experiential perspective.

We propose that VM encoding involves this higher-order form of empathy. When someone shares a significant life episode with us, we do not merely receive informational content; we engage in an empathic process that involves: (1) direct

perception of the other person's emotional expression, (2) to imaginatively enter their perspective on the remembered event, sharing (con-living) the affective dimension of their experience, and (3) objectifying and integrating this empathically grasped content into our own memory system. The emotional charge is not merely "about" the story we're told, but emerges from sharing the narrator's affective state toward the remembered event.

This empathic dimension explains at least two puzzling features of VMs. First, it accounts for their phenomenological similarity to EMs: vivid imagery and emotional intensity arise from empathic engagement with the narrator's own recollection. Second, it clarifies why the narrator-listener relationship matters: VM intensity correlates with the narrator's importance for our identity because empathic engagement deepens with emotional connection.

The emotional investment required for empathic engagement also explains why not all testimony produces VMs. For a narrative to become encoded as VM rather than mere semantic knowledge, we must enter empathy's imaginative phase, being drawn into and guided by the narrator's perspective. This arguably requires both the narrator's capacity to convey their experience and the listener's empathic engagement.

This account has broader implications for understanding the intersubjective constitution of memory and identity. If VMs are formed through empathy, then significant portions of our autobiographical landscape—which shapes our sense of self—are constituted not just individually but through empathic engagement with others. The memories that orient our decisions and self-understanding include not only what we have experienced, but what we have empathically shared with significant others.

References

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