

From memory to identity: the impact of mild cognitive impairment on autobiographical memory and its implications for clinical practice and research

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The research presented in this thesis emerges during a time of profound global focus on ageing, as the United Nations General Assembly has proclaimed the years 2021 to 2030 the UN Decade of Healthy Ageing. Within this framework, healthcare systems are increasingly called upon to offer timely support and resources for the early management of age-related conditions.

Past autobiographical memories hold deep significance for older adults and their caregivers. These memories are intricately tied to personal identity, emotional well-being, mood regulation, social engagement, and cognitive abilities such as problem-solving.

On one hand, when considering typical ageing, research has shown a gradual decline in autobiographical memory, with the episodic component being more affected than the semantic one—an effect that generally becomes noticeable after the age of 60. On the other hand, in the context of pathological ageing, while extensive research has explored how Alzheimer's disease affects autobiographical memory, its influence in earlier, subtler forms of cognitive decline—such as Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI)—remains a matter of ongoing inquiry.

This thesis seeks to explore the functioning of autobiographical memory across both typical and pathological ageing. To this end, the work is structured into five chapters. The first two chapters provide a theoretical and bibliographic foundation, examining key models and concepts related to MCI and autobiographical memory. The third chapter presents a systematic review of the literature aiming to analyze the functioning of autobiographical memory in patients with MCI. The fourth chapter illustrates the attempt to revise a new instrument for assessing autobiographical memory in the Italian population—the Autobiographical Memory of the Self (Memoria Autobiografica del Sé; MA-SELF). Finally, the fifth chapter introduces an empirical study designed to evaluate the MA-SELF's ability to discriminate between individuals with normal cognitive profiles and those with MCI.

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