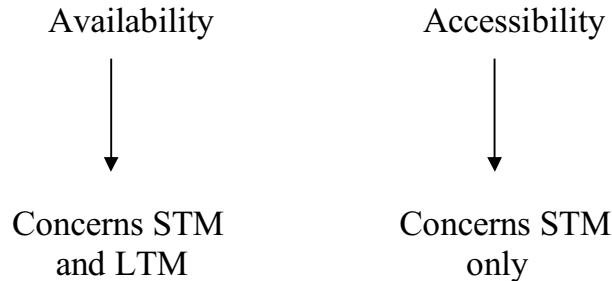


“In order to prevent forgetting, it is important to consider why it occurs”

The concept of forgetting suggests that something has disappeared from memory – it is not available. Or it could be that memory is simply mislaid – it is not accessible.



Interference Theory

It is assumed that one set of learning in some way interferes with another set and wipes out the memory. Proactive interference is when previous learning interferes with later learning (Past experience interferes with current recall). Retroactive interference is when later learning disrupts memory for earlier learning. (Successive experience interferes with recall of material learned earlier). A study that proves this is the Jenkins and Dallenbach (1924) study. They asked two students to recall nonsense syllables at intervals between one and eight hours. The students were either awake or asleep during the withholding interval. If the theory was correct we would expect the same amount of forgetting whether they were asleep or awake. The fact that they forgot more when they were awake suggests that the interference from other activities was responsible for the increased forgetting, rather than decay.

Criticisms

It is unlikely that interference theory has much applicability to everyday life. It is rare that two different responses are attached to the same stimulus and therefore much of our forgetting is unlikely to be due to interference. Their experiment was flawed because there was no control over what was happening when the participants were awake or asleep. Also there were other differences between the two conditions. In the asleep condition, the students learned the material in the evening, whereas their learning usually occurred in the morning in the awake condition.

Trace Decay Theory

Forgetting might also be due to the gradual decaying of the memory traces in long-term memory this has also been suggested for short-term memory. It is hard to study the physical and psychological changes directly. The theory is if a person does nothing during the time of learning and recall then they forget the material this would mean that the trace has disappeared. Tulving and Psotka have tested the theory. Participants were

given a long list of words to remember. The words belonged to several different categories (e.g. articles of furniture, four footed animals). The participants were tested twice. On the first occasion they were asked for free (non-cued) recall, i.e. to write down all the words they could remember. The second time they were given category names as cues and were again asked to recall. This time they were able to remember up to four times as many words.

Criticisms

There is very little support for the theory. If all memory traces are subject to decay, it is surprising how well we can remember many events that happened several years ago and which are rarely thought about or rehearsed.

Repression Theory

Repression refers to information that cannot be retrieved because it is too emotionally threatening to us and has been, according to Freud, pushed into our unconscious mind and unavailable to our conscious awareness. Repression is therefore a problem of accessibility. An example would be individuals who have been abused as children who have no memories of the abuse until as adults when undergoing therapy they recover their lost memories.

Criticisms

Experiments have been attempted where subjects have been subjected to anxiety producing situations to see if forgetting occurs. However these experiments are ethically questionable as they affect the participant's psychological well being, and they probably do not simulate real live anxiety producing situations.

Cue Dependent Forgetting

This is an example of forgetting because of lack of accessibility. What happens is that information is in your memory but you cannot access it until an appropriate cue is given. This information is said to be available but not accessible. This may explain why a delirious person can remember a foreign language even if it has not been spoken since childhood. Also this can explain why people who haven't used algebra for years can remember it if they follow a refresher course (Badrick and Hall (1991).

Today it is the most appropriate conclusion that most (but not all) of forgetting is cue dependent.