

The role of emotional factors in memory

Emotional factors can make things easier to remember and they can also make remembering more difficult. A lot of research has been carried out about the role of emotion in memory and recall.

One role of emotional factors in memory is helping us try to forget something. This is called repression. Freud believed that there was three parts of personality; id (the drives) ego (defence) and superego (conscience). Freud described repression as motivated forgetting, where bad memories are pushed into the unconscious in order to defend the ego from anxiety. For example, if someone had a bad memory that they just wanted to forget, they would be able to push this memory into the back of their minds. In 1964, Williams conducted an experiment in which he interviewed 129 women who had all suffered some form of sexual abuse before the age of 12. His findings were that 38% had no memory of the abuse happening at all, and a further 16% said they had huge chunks of their childhood life missing. This is a good indication that repression exists. Another explanation for this could be that the abuse victims were so young when it happened that they simply forgot, or the victims could just be unwilling to talk about what happened. This experiment used a very biased sample – participants were women of which most of them were poor and lived in urban places, so there could be another reason for poor recall instead of repression. Other studies also support the theory of repression. One of them is Herman and Schatzow, who found that 28% of women who had experienced incest in their childhood years had no memory of it.

It has also been suggested that if you are tested on things while you're in the same mood as you learnt them, you're more likely to remember them. For example, if you learn things in a happy mood, your recall will be better if you remember them while in a happy mood. This is why if you're depressed, it's hard to feel better because all you can remember is depressing things. This is called mood-state dependant memory. Levinger and Clark researched into this in 1961. They gave participants a list of words and asked them to say the first thing that they thought of when they saw the word. Some of the words were emotive such as war, fear and death, whereas the other words were ordinary, such as house, tree and window. When participants were asked later to recall what they associated the words with, it took them longer with the emotive words. Levinger and Clark said that this was because you try and block out the 'bad' words. This could be also classed as repression. A criticism of this is that it could have taken the participants longer to recall the associations with emotive words simply because there's more words associated with them.

In the 1970s, Tulving conducted an experiment on places of learning and testing. In his study, there were four groups of divers; group one learnt what to do on land, then were tested on it. Group two learnt it on land, but were tested underwater, group three learnt underwater and were tested on land, and finally group four learnt underwater and were tested underwater. Tulving found that the divers in groups one and four did better in the tests than two and three. This indicates that you can recall things better if you're tested in the same place as you learnt them. He called this the encoding specificity principle. This could be to do with association and familiarity – that you emotionally feel more comfortable if you are tested in the same place.

Abethney also researched into places of learning and testing. He was a university lecturer, and throughout the year, he gave his students regular tests. He split the students into two groups – the first group were always tested in the same room, with the same tutor, whereas the other group were tested in different rooms, with different tutors. Group one consistently did better throughout the year. This

supports Tulving's encoding specificity principle. The participants were all university students however, and the results could be different with older people.

There are some things that you're more likely to remember because they strike certain emotions. For example, if someone was asked to remember what they had for lunch a couple of months ago, they wouldn't be able to remember, however ask them to remember the bombings in London in July 2005 and they are much more likely to be able to remember it. This is because people would have found it very emotional and out of the ordinary. Conway et al did an experiment on university students (some British, and some non-British) where he asked them to remember Margaret Thatcher resigning, and then re-tested them later on. 86% of UK students remembered it because it mattered to them because it was their country, whereas only 29% of non-UK students remembered it because it didn't mean anything to them. This is another role of emotion in memory. A criticism of this is that lots of people dropped out from the first time they were interviewed, so the results may not be that accurate.

Another role of emotional factors in memory is giving us flashbulb memories. Flashbulb memories are vivid and enduring memories of significant events in our lives. The context of the memory is also involved, as well as the event itself. Kulik suggested that there was something special in the brain called a neutral mechanism which helps with vivid recall. For example, people remembered the London bombings because it could have made them upset or angry. Another explanation of this is that because it's out of the ordinary, people talk about it a lot therefore you just remember it.

Talarico researched into flashbulb memories. He asked participants on the 12th September 2001 what they remember from the day before, 11th September 2001 (the date of the terrorist attacks). The participants were then all asked two sets of questions a certain amount of time later (from one week up to 32 weeks after the event). The questions in set one were about how the participant heard about the attacks and where they were / what they were doing, and the second set of questions were about what they were doing in the days prior to the attacks. Talarico found that the everyday events were remembered better than 9/11, for which the memories were less accurate and less consistent. This means that despite the vividness of flashbulb memories, flashbulb memories are no more likely to be remembered than ordinary memories. A criticism for this experiment is that all the participants were students and lived where the attacks took place – older people might have recalled the attacks better, and the participants might be too upset and worried about 9/11 to recall accurately.

In conclusion, emotional factors can have an effect on memory; either for helping people remember things (such as mood-state dependant memory and flashbulb memories) or helping people forget (repression).