

“ WHY PEOPLE FORGET? “

By

TrinaLynn O.S. Tevid

For

Professor John Armstrong

PY120-1/General Psychology

Guam Community College

Spring 2001

INTRODUCTION

The topic I have chosen for my research paper is “forgetfulness.” The theories of why people forget found in my paper are the theories of Decay, Disuse, Interference, Motivated Forgetting, and the False Memory Syndrome. This research paper explains the differences between the theories and their positive and negative contributions towards improvement of the human memory.

THEORIES OF FORGETTING

The first theory is the theory of Decay, which suggests that sensory impressions and acquired knowledge of facts leave memory traces in the brain, which gradually fade causing the loss of the information (Psychology A Connectext Fourth Edition, 1998.) This theory states that information retained will eventually be lost as the person ages; the amount of time it takes to forget is entirely dependant on the individual (Psychology A Connectext Fourth Edition, 1998.)

Bjork & Bjork’s (1992) theory of disuse suggests that decay occurs not because of time but because of the inability to associate or use the information with any other information. Bjork and Bjork believed that the memory traces if used constantly or associated with other information would not begin to fade and the memory could be retrieved easily (Psychology A Connectext Fourth Edition, 1998.)

Both the theory of Decay and the theory of Disuse explain why information is forgotten neither of them factor in long-term memory, meaning they do not explain why people can recall information from their childhood but forget something that occurred only a few days ago. Although both of these theories are generally the same except for the causes of loss, decay is more widely believed by many people in today’s societies (Psychology A Connectext Fourth Edition, 1998.)

The second theory is Interference (Benton J. Underwood,) this theory states that once information is properly encoded and stored in long-term memory the information is relatively permanent, but because of interference we are unable to retrieve the information at one time but at another (Recall and Recognition, 1976.) The two types of interference are proactive

interference (PI) which is information retained before the memory you are trying to retrieve and the second type of interference is retroactive interference (RI) which is the information retained after the memory you are trying to retrieve (Recall and Recognition, 1976.) A scientist by the name of White (1989,) believed that when rare moments occur the human mind is more apt on remembering them to average moments over extended periods of time. This suggests the importance of interference (especially proactive interference) in the difficulty at recalling episodic events (Psychology A Connectext Fourth Edition, 1998.) Benton J. Underwood also believed that in addition to interference, the human mind is unable to recall long-term memories because of the lack of environmental stimulus. Underwood believed that when people encode information the human mind uses critical features of the event to encode and recall the event at a later time (Psychology A Connectext Fourth Edition, 1998.) This explains why people can recall information easier when they are in the same environment when the information was first encoded.

Many psychologists currently believe in the interference theory because it explains why people can recall memories of their childhood, but it does not explain why it only applies with some memories and not all, they also tend to criticize that much of the work has been on nonsense syllables or unrelated words and its applicability to everyday situations is not yet fully known (Psychology A Connectext Fourth Edition, 1998.)

Another theory called “Motivated Forgetting,” was highly believed by Sigmund Freud, this theory suggest that people forget things because they do not want to remember them for certain reasons (<http://www.garysturt.free-online.co.uk/forget.htm>.) Another name for this type of forgetting is “repression.” Freud believed that when people have painful or anxiety-arousing episodes, they repress them into their unconscious minds and thereafter have a difficult time retrieving them. Freud believed that any information repressed does not fade away from memory, we may force ourselves to forget them but they still remain in storage and the human mind still has the ability to remember them. Another scientist by the name of Anderson (1995) also believed that repression caused the loss of certain memories, but he believed that repression was caused not by anxiety-arousing episodes, but by post-traumatic shock (<http://www.garysturt.free-online.co.uk/forget.htm>.) Through his experiments he concluded that many people forgot specific time periods when something traumatizing occurred in their lives. One of his experiments was Sirham Sirham, he could not remember shooting Robert Kennedy

(<http://www.garysturt.free-online.co.uk/forget.htm>.) Parkin (1993) another scientist who believed repression was caused by post-traumatic shock, experimented with survivors of the Holocaust and discovered that well adjusted survivors were less able to recall their dreams than less well adjusted survivors when woken (<http://www.garysturt.free-online.co.uk/forget.htm>.)

Lastly we have the “Gestalt Theory of Forgetting,” also known as the “False memory Syndrome (Wulf, 1922.) Wulf’s theory suggests that when memories and information are encoded with details missing the mind automatically provides that information making it whole. He has no explanations as to where the information is obtained in order to make the memory whole. This theory is highly criticized by many because it suggests that memories if not detailed are changed and no longer accurate (<http://www.garysturt.free-online.co.uk/forget.htm>.)

CONCLUSION

Although forgetting is a natural event, the human mind is capable of recalling information and delaying the loss of memory. In the theory of Disuse (Bjork & Bjork, 1992) in order to retain the information, it must be in constant use or associated to other information for the memory traces to remain active in the human mind. In the theory of Motivated Forgetting (highly believed by Freud,) a person must want to remember some anxiety-arousing episode in their life, he also states that once information is properly encoded in long-term memory it becomes relatively permanent (<http://www.garysturt.free-online.co.uk/forget.htm>.) The Interference Theory (Benton J. Underwood) suggests that if information is encoded properly into the human memory, the retrieval of information whether learned early in life or later will be easier to retrieve.

Due to the broad range of theories and the variables associated with individuals based on their ability to recall and amount of time, no one theory is believed by all psychologists. Ongoing research on the human memory processes, promises to help shed more light on the processes of memory and forgetting (Psychology A Connectext Fourth Edition, 1998.)

REFERENCES

Brown, J. (Ed.). (1976). Recall & Recognition. London: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

Mondon, L. (1998). Forgetting. {On-line}. Available: <http://www.garysturt.free-online.co.uk/forget.htm>

Pettijohn, T.F. (1998). Psychology A Connectext. (4th. Ed.) United States of America: Dushkin/Mcgraw-Hill