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It's in the details: The role of selective discussion in forgetting of children's autobiographical memories



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ABSTRACT

This experiment investigated whether retrieval-induced forgetting (RIF) would be found in children's self-generated autobiographical memory recall. An adapted version of the RIF paradigm for adults' autobiographical memories was administered to 8- and 9-year-old children ($N = 65$). We hypothesized that RIF would be found in terms of both number of memories recalled and amount of memory detail reported. The relationship between memory detail at the retrieval practice phase and RIF magnitude was also investigated. Consistent with hypotheses, RIF was found for both the number of memories recalled and the amount of memory detail reported. In addition, memory detail at retrieval practice was associated with increased RIF magnitude. Findings extend the current literature in three ways. First, they indicate that selective discussion of autobiographical events with children can cause forgetting of similar non-discussed events. Second, even when these non-discussed events are recalled, they contain sparser memory detail. Finally, when events are selectively discussed in greater detail, forgetting of similar non-discussed events occurs to a greater extent.

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Introduction

Conversation about past experiences in the context of parent–child interactions promotes autobiographical memory development (Salmon & Reese, 2016). Yet the selective nature of conversation about the past inevitably results in some details being omitted from discussion. Much of the literature has focused on how aspects of conversation between parents and children influence how children come to recall their everyday experiences (Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006; Wareham & Salmon, 2006). Much less is known, however, about the impact of selective discussion on children's memory for the information that was not discussed (Salmon & Reese, 2015). The current study focused on these non-discussed autobiographical event details and investigated how conversation shapes what is forgotten rather than what is recalled.

The retrieval-induced forgetting (RIF) paradigm is an experimental proxy for conversation allowing investigation, under conditions of experimental control, of the impact of non-discussed information on later recall (Anderson, Bjork, & Bjork, 1994). RIF refers to the finding that retrieving a selection of memories at the expense of other similar memories results in a decreased ability to recall those non-practiced memories relative to memories that were never discussed (Anderson et al., 1994). The original RIF paradigm uses category–exemplar word pairs (e.g., fruit–apple, fruit–orange, vehicle–car), whereby participants practice retrieving some learned word pairs (e.g., fruit–apple, termed RP+) but not others from the same category (e.g., fruit–orange, termed RP–). Some categories are not practiced at all (e.g., vehicle–car, termed NRP). Participants are then cued with each category name and instructed to retrieve all of the exemplars from that category. Typically, a facilitation effect is found for RP+ exemplars, such that recall is greater for these items than for RP– and NRP items. Surprisingly, however, a forgetting effect is also found, such that recall of RP– items is poorer than recall of NRP items (Anderson et al., 1994). This suggests that recall is poorer for non-practiced items belonging to a category of which some items are practiced relative to items belonging to a category of which no items are practiced.

Although the RIF effect has been found to be relatively robust across different stimuli and testing conditions (Murayama, Miyatsu, Buchli, & Storm, 2014), some boundary conditions have been identified, signaling that RIF is not inevitable in every situation. Since Anderson et al.'s (1994) initial findings, the RIF paradigm has been applied to a number of contexts, including eyewitness testimonies and educational settings (see Storm et al., 2015, for a review). In most cases, selective retrieval of a range of stimuli has resulted in forgetting of the non-practiced material, although the magnitude of RIF is often reduced for more real-world stimuli in comparison with word pairs (Murayama et al., 2014).

The major theoretical explanation for RIF, a response–competition inhibition account, may explain this difference in magnitude. According to this account (Anderson et al., 1994), presentation of a category cue produces competition between RP+ and RP– items, and to respond correctly during the retrieval practice phase, RP– items must be inhibited to facilitate correct recall of RP+ items. This inhibition results in poorer recall of RP– items than of NRP items at the test phase. In cases where the to-be-remembered stimuli are too strongly integrated, however, the RIF effect can be diminished or even eliminated (Anderson & McCulloch, 1999). This integration may weaken the inhibitory effect of the selective retrieval practice on recall of RP– items. The integration serves to reduce competition between stimuli, and rather than selectively targeting RP+ items, retrieval practice also triggers activation of RP– memories (Anderson, 2003). The reduced RIF magnitudes observed for real-world RIF paradigms suggest a reduction in competition between stimuli and, therefore, decreased inhibition of RP– items.

Strengthening the applicability of the findings from this paradigm to real-world settings, recent research with adults has demonstrated RIF for autobiographical memories (Barnier, Hung, & Conway, 2004; Stone, Luminet, & Hirst, 2013; Wessel & Hauer, 2006). These studies have adapted the RIF paradigm in a way that more accurately mirrors conversation, whereby multiple autobiographical memories, both positively and negatively valenced, are generated (see Storm et al., 2015, for a review). Despite some variations in methodology, these studies have consistently demonstrated RIF of non-discussed autobiographical memories. Findings have been mixed regarding valence,

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