

Day & Ross (2014)

Predicting Confidence In Flashbulb Memories

This study is used to answer questions on:

Flashbulb memories

Abstract

This study aimed to test if level of attachment to an event can increase confidence and accuracy of flashbulb memories. 3 days after the death of Michael Jackson, 135 participants (96 women, 38 men, 1 undisclosed) completed a volunteer online survey. Respondents were mostly white Canadians. The survey measured the participants level of attachment to Michael Jackson and asked for their memories of the event. 18 months later, 75 of the participants completed a second questionnaire (almost identical to the first) and the researchers compared the results.

They found that the level of attachment to Michael Jackson increased surprise, emotional response and level of rehearsal. It also was linked to confidence in memory. However, it did not link to accuracy of memory. The researchers concluded that feeling close to an event can cause stronger reactions and increase confidence in memories, but the memories are not any more accurate than other memories or flashbulb memories.



Aim

- To test if level of attachment to an event can increase an individual's confidence flashbulb memories
- To test if level of attachment toward the victim increases accuracy of flashbulb memories

Method

Participants

135 participants (96 women, 38 men, 1 undisclosed) volunteered to take part through online advertisements on social media sites. No reward was given to participants. 75 of these participants also completed the second survey a year-and-a-half later and were entered in a draw for \$200 as an incentive. The sample contained 83% white, 8% Asian and 4% East Indian. Most respondents were Canadian (72%) or American (18%). The mean age was 32 years old.

Procedure

The advertisement for the experiment was placed on social media sites shortly after the death of Michael Jackson on June 25th 2009. The first survey was taken 3 days after Jackson's death and was taken online. Participants were asked seven specific questions relating to flashbulb memories based on Brown & Kulik's original experiment:

1. The day and time that they first learned of the death
2. How they first heard the news
3. What they were doing
4. Where they were
5. How they felt
6. Who else was there
7. What they did immediately afterward

They also used Likert-type questions to indicate how surprised they were by Michael Jackson's death and the strength of their emotional reaction.

They also indicated how much they talked about the death and how much media coverage they followed.

They were also how connected they felt to Michael Jackson and whether they were a fan of his and/or his music.

These extra questions established emotional intensity, rehearsal and connection to Michael Jackson's death.

18 months later, the participants completed a second survey. It contained the same questions and asked them to indicate their confidence in their recollections.

To check if the participant's recollections were accurate, two coders compared the answers on both questionnaires. If the memory was accurate, a score of 2 was assigned to the answer. If it is was reasonably accurate, a score of 1 was assigned. If the answer was inconsistent, it received a score of 0.

Results

Those with a strong level of attachment to Michael Jackson experienced stronger levels of surprise, emotional intensity and rehearsal.

Those with a high level of attachment also were much more confident in their ability to recall events accurately. However, this was found not to be true and level of attachment showed no correlation with accuracy of memories.

Surprise was linked to accuracy of memory. Those who were more surprised had more accurate memories 18 months after the event.

Conclusion

Level of attachment to an event increases surprise, emotion and rehearsal of the event. This increases the level of confidence an individual has in their memory of the event. However, it does not increase the accuracy of the memories.



Evaluation

Generalisability

- There was a reasonable sample of 75 participants who responded.

Reliability

- The questionnaire was kept consistent throughout both surveys.
- The answers were examined thoroughly to test for accuracy by two coders.

Application to life

- Knowing a person's level of attachment to an event could help friends, family or therapists to gauge how affect they would be by an event.
- Knowing that confidence in a long-term memory does not necessarily indicate its accuracy, individuals can be aware that their memories may not be trustworthy.

Validity

- The news of Michael Jackson's death was especially shocking and surprising, so this may have increased the effect compared to other less surprising events.
- Only fans of Michael Jackson were likely to respond to the survey. It is possible they over-stated their level of attachment in the emotion of the moment (although this could be considered to have also been investigated in the experiment).
- The large dropout rate (nearly 50% of responders did not complete the second survey) could be because those that did not complete the survey felt they would not be able to do so, biasing the results.

Ethics

- Participants may have felt upset at taking part so soon after the event. However, there was no pressure to take part and they did so willingly.

