

The Malleable Mind

With memories being connected to the past, present, and future allows us to use the experiences that have been encoded to guide us through everyday life. We learn from the bad and the good and encode that information so that we may call upon it again whenever a situation arises or to prepare ourselves for what may come. In addition to preparing for our near future, reminiscing about past experiences allows us to understand our emotions in those events. It also provides us the chance to improve our language skills, form our identity, and even influence the way we view and act in the world around us. While it does seem weird that our memory is connected to our emotions, it makes sense once you learn the connection between them.

In an article by Salmon and Reese, they discuss the benefits of reminiscing with young children. For example, one of the benefits that they found is that it helps children become emotionally literate (Salmon & Reese, 2016). When parents talk to their children about past experiences it encourages children to put their experiences into words. Through this children are able to become narratively coherent in the events that they were a part of. This narrative coherence provides the foundation for constructing stories with a structured flow that is imbued with emotion and details. Having a foundation that allows us to make structured stories of our lives will allow us to strengthen the match between “past” and “future”. However, we must also remember that our emotions, while they are chemical reactions in the brain, are actually our responses or reactions to our environment.

Also within narrative coherence resides historical and narrative truths. The historical truths within narrative coherence are factual events that can be verified through documentation, records, or eyewitness accounts. While narrative truths are subjective to interpretation. For example, the article by Salmon and Reese has an excerpt about a mother having a conversation with her child about a haircut, where the mother talks about what happened during the haircut (historical truths) while the child talks about their experience during the haircut (narrative truths) (Salmon & Reese, 2016). The mother throughout the conversation talked about what happened during the haircut such as the noise of the clippers and the child’s reaction to it.

While the child talked about how they felt during the haircut. The child stated that they enjoyed it because it tickled while the mother agreed due to the observation of the child's smile throughout the haircut. In this conversation the child learned to express how they felt during this experience along with putting words to the emotions being felt. Just as this child learned how to communicate their emotions we too can use narrative practices to become more emotionally literate.

In another article by Vanaken and colleagues explains how narrative coherence and reminiscing is beneficial for mental health as well (Vanaken et al., 2022). They performed a longitudinal study and found that those who are more coherent about their past positive life events experienced a relative decrease in depressive and anxious symptoms. This was due to experiencing fewer negative interactions with their social network over time. Just like stated previously we too as adults can benefit from reminiscing. Having that strong match between our past and future selves we are able to adjust in society better. Making those connections to past events stronger allows us to make better choices in our ever changing destinies. So by achieving a coherent narrative of our life stories we are able to tap into these benefits.

However, sometimes recalling information and reminiscing has its downsides. In the article by authors Lynn et al., they discuss the memory wars and the key conflicts, controversies, and flashpoints in this so-called war that has affected legislation, civil suits, and even criminal trials (Lynn, McNally, and Loftus, 2023). During this time and even now researchers and clinicians are not on the same page regarding the explanatory framework one should use when dealing with explaining how someone experiences a seamlessly spontaneous memory of something never happening to them. This drove the public into panic because there was a disconnect in communication between the public and researchers. But there is nothing to be scared about when you learn why a spontaneous memory of an event can seamlessly pop up.

Our memories and minds are malleable, leading to many outside influences having an impact on our recollection of past events. For example, depending on the schema and cues that we use can influence the information we encode of an event. Some people may make strong schemas which cause bias. This bias can hinder us from forming new schemas that can be open to change. This is also influenced by the way we

reminisce in our childhood. For example, if our parents have a maladaptive thought process the child may pick up on those processes like rumination. Our brains are still growing as children soaking up information both small and big. So if we learn rumination at an early age it can cause maladaptive memory processes. However, we should turn that fear into excitement because we can nurture adaptive malleable processes. Adaptive malleability allows us to control our personal narratives to make good on bad situations. From an adaptive malleability standpoint, you should most importantly nurture positive elaborative reminiscing with children which will correlate with mental health. We should also celebrate that our memories are not perfect and that is how we create schemas and find information in our heads when we need it. Having a schema that can be changed and rigid is more beneficial because it allows us to constantly improve the way we encode information and our narrative coherence.

If we take this information we can begin to understand why it is important to have adaptive malleability in the context of building creative cognition. While it might seem counterproductive to have a mind that always changes, in the end it actually is truly beneficial. In an article by Ditta and Storm they cover the seven “sins” of memory the authors propose that these sins may be virtues when it comes to creative cognition in the study of memory (Ditta & Storm, 2018). The seven sins of memory are transience, absent-mindedness, blocking, misattribution, suggestibility, bias, and persistence. You might be thinking that having transience or absent-mindedness would be a hindrance in developing creative cognitive abilities. But if we were to remember every single piece of information, details, events, etc. in our lives then it would be impossibly difficult to find a particular piece if we were to ever seek it out at a particular point in our lives (Ditta & Storm, 2018). Having certain blanks or inaccessible memories provides the opportunity for our ideas to be changed to be malleable. In addition blocking, which makes information temporarily inaccessible, is beneficial for us to constantly add new information into our memory banks. The combination of misattribution, suggestibility, and bias enables gist-reasoning so that our schema processes can be generalized to be able to create a coherent narrative. The last piece of the puzzle is persistence which provides us a sense of purpose which feeds and enhances our motivation. With using all seven virtues we

are able to use them to create new found ways using new and old information to experience *vuija de* when handling intractable problems.

With everything considered, we should aim to keep an adaptive malleable mind. From the beginning we have known that our minds are influenced by our culture, environment, and also our own narrative story that we write. So by keeping our memory and minds like a clay pot on the wheel that can be reshaped over and over to hold different types of information, we can achieve great cognitive feats like creative cognition. While it can seem scary to even attempt to develop creative cognition the best solution is to always try. Rome nor the Mona Lisa were built or created in a day, it was meticulous work, taking much-needed breaks, and being persistent. So I invite you to think outside of the box and to look at old things with new eyes as we develop our cognitive skills to be adaptable and think creatively.

References

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