

Flashbulb Memories: A Permanent Enigma in the World of Psychology

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Throughout our lives, there are unprecedented events that, when informed of them, may leave us shocked or surprised. The moments we first hear these events tend to be stored as more vivid memories. This phenomenon is known as flashbulb memories (FBMs). They are defined as “a vivid, enduring memory associated with a personally significant and emotional event, often including such details as where the individual was or what he or she was doing at the time of the event” (APA, 2022). Flashbulb memories are known to resemble photographs in their quality, almost like snapshots of a very specific moment, and are episodic in nature. This is justified as the events that inspire these memories are often emotionally arousing and significant.

Flashbulb memories were first established in 1977 by psychologists Roger Brown and James Kulik. The term was coined to describe how our brains react to an unforeseen public event, and how it retains that reaction with time. The term public does not only refer to large scale events that impact people on a national or global level but also personal events, such as familial (Hirst and Phelps, 2016). Examples of events that inspire FBMs include the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the 9/11 incident (Hirst and Phelps), a death in the family, a marriage, etc. Events that inspire FBM do not need to be tragic in nature.

To test whether their theory on FBMs was correct, Brown and Kulik conducted a study in the same year. The participants were 40 White Americans and 40 Black Americans between the ages 20 and 60. Both groups were reminded of 9 significant public events, mainly assassinations of political figures, and one personally significant event. They were asked to rate these events on a scale of five factors: personal consequentiality, surprise, emotional arousal and levels of rehearsal (overt and covert). If all factors were ranked highly, FBMs were considered to be formed. The results indicated that the John F. Kennedy assassination incited most FBMs out of all the events presented. However, the assassination

of a Civil Rights leader, like Martin Luther King Jr., would bear more significance to the African Americans in the sample, which increased its likelihood of being a flashbulb memory to them. The factor of race played a role in which events had more significance to each group. From this experiment, the researcher concluded that FBMs were caused by activity in the amygdala, a subcortical brain structure which is responsible for emotional arousal. Their FBM theory, too, had proven to be true, even if slightly.

As with everything, the theory of FBMs was met with a lot of criticism. Psychologist William Hirst studied FBMs in depth and conducted a study to add validity to the theory. He, along with his team of fifteen, conducted a study based on the 9/11 incident. Participants were asked about the emotionally charged incident, and their answers were written down. Ten years later, the experimenters revisited the participants and asked them to recall what they had initially said. The results state, “Some of the 9/11 studies indicate that we forget or falsely remember much more than we realize; we get facts wrong, for example, or misremember our emotional reactions.” (Law, 2011). As per the conclusions, it can be inferred that the accuracy of FBMs is undetermined. They are predicted to be extremely vivid in nature, however studies like this suggest their vividness wanes over time. Additionally, the emotional nature in which these emotions are conceived may mean that the details were never accurate at all; they were simply what our brains processed through the emotions. The full effect and inner workings of FBMs can only be determined after further research.

Researchers state that FBMs, when formed, are crucial to a person’s identity. Although they are rare, FBMs make a lasting impact when they occur. The factors behind the formation of FBMs are still largely unknown, however, there are some predictions psychologists have made. One of the most prominent factors is consequentiality. The term consequentiality pertains to not just effects on the personal lives of people, but a more general effect on their identity and decision-making. An event could have varying levels of

significance and consequentiality for different groups (cultures, genders, race, etc.). For instance, studies have shown that the death of Princess Diana had a significant impact on the British population despite not affecting their personal lives specifically (Hirst and Phelps, 2016). That is not to say that every public event creates FBMs in the minds of the public; it is only the occurrences that pose a great significance to the recipient. The accuracy of these memories depend on how much they are rehearsed over time. If a person recalls that memory very frequently, it is more likely that the details they remember will remain the same. They may not be accurate to the actual event itself, but the more rehearsal there is, the lower the discrepancies in the memories.

FBMs are highly important in shaping the social identity of a person. It is said that the formation of these memories makes people feel like they are part of history, that their life somehow aligns with the motions of history (Hirst and Phelps, 2016). As most events that have been studied to observe FBMs are public in nature, they also enforce a sense of community. They are able to reinforce and reflect similar thoughts and values into the group that has experienced the event in common. Their memories are mostly tainted by their similar emotions over the event, which unites them. Additionally, their views on the world and other groups of people are influenced by their emotional experience. Due to their assumed vividness, people are often very confident in their FBMs. Unless tested, they have full faith in their FBMs as far as reliability is concerned. Their confidence also comes from their attachment to the event that caused the memory (Hirst and Phelps, 2016). Therefore, FBMs become an instrumental part in shaping peoples' thought process.

Though many things about FBMs are unknown -- like how they are formed, their accuracy and significance -- the theory remains influential on the brain's cognitive functions, such as memory. Brown and Kulik, the psychologists that first theorized about FBMs, continue to research it and conduct more experiments to further validate it. There are many

waves to be made in the world of FBMs, but one cannot deny the fascination they elicit from psychologists, researchers, and the general public. They are yet another phenomenon to be uncovered in the psychological world.

Bibliography

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