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Introduction

- Our judicial system recognizes that eyewitness testimony plays a part in the prosecution and defense of individuals.
- Although statements of eyewitnesses can initially seem quite compelling, research has shown that such testimony is not 100% conclusive; rather, it is part of a number of different sets of data that are required to help a jury reach a verdict (Peace & Porter, 2004).
- What makes testimony even more complex is the amount of time that has transpired since the event was witnessed, and whether there was trauma surrounding the witnessed events (Porter & Peace, 2007).
- These two factors, trauma and lapse of time, make the debate heated over the veracity of the eyewitness testimony of Holocaust survivors in judging cases of accused Nazi oppressors.

Trauma Superiority Theory

- There is a debate if trauma increases or decreases reliability of memories
- The **trauma superiority theory** claims that trauma surrounding the events of the memory actually increase the quality of the memory, creating what researchers have dubbed “flashbulb memories” with heightened clarity (Brown and Kulik, as cited by Southwick et al., 1997).
- Some researchers have postulated that the trauma surrounding such horrifying events as were experienced in the concentration camps causes the survivor to rehearse the memories, making them more vivid, even decades after the events took place (Wagenaar & Groeneweg, 1988).

- In relevant research, survivors of Camp Erika were interviewed between 1943 to 1948, and then again between 1984 to 1988.
- Eyewitness reports were given on a variety of information in the camp, including the identification of De Rijke as a Kapos, allegedly guilty of torturing and killing prisoners.
- The researchers found a significant amount of recall of basic facts surrounding life in Camp Erika
- However, there was divergence in the testimonial identification of De Rijke (Wagenaar & Groeneweg, 1988).
- There were similar findings in research conducted with survivors of Auschwitz, when asked to provide general information about the life in Auschwitz, and also to identify 10 known Nazis who were in Auschwitz at that time.
- This research found 60% accuracy of general information but found that ability to identify the 10 known Nazis was very poor (Schelach & Nachson, 2001).

Memory Scores

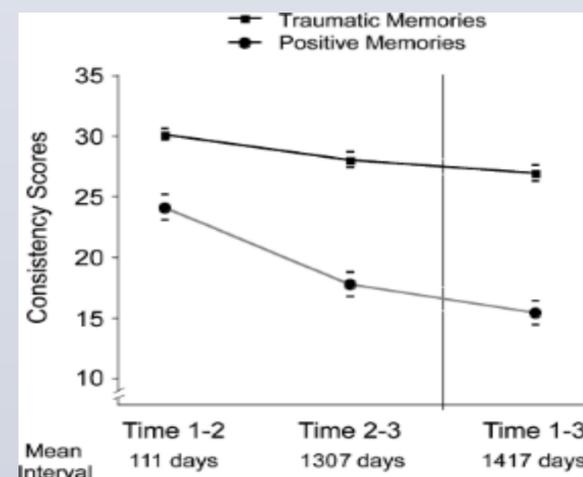


Figure 1. Consistency scores for positive and traumatic memories over the entire follow-up period. Standard errors of the means are indicated by the dashes above and below the plotted symbols. (Source: Porter & Peace, 2007)

Memory Scores

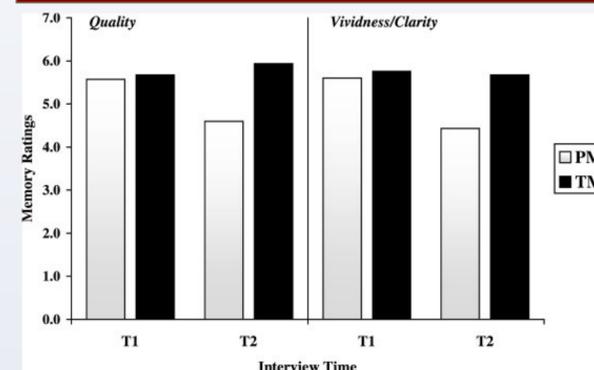


Figure 2. Mean differences on ratings of memory quality (panel 1) and vividness/clarity (panel 2) for traumatic (TM) and positive (PM) memories across time 1 (T1) and time 2 (T2)

(Source: Peace & Porter, 2004)

Trauma Theory

- Proponents of the **trauma theory** argue that memory is malleable, and the brain uses different strategies that can actually change the recorded memories (Southwick et al., 1997).
- In research conducted with U.S. veterans of Operation Desert Storm, subjects were asked to recall details of traumatic events, both one month after the events, and then again two years later.
- In that study, 88% of respondents changed 1 of their responses to the 19 items on the trauma questionnaire, and 61% had more than one switched response (Southwick et al., 1997).

Trauma Equivalency Theory

- Yet other researchers provide evidence for the **trauma equivalency theory**, which states that trauma is not a factor in improving or diminishing the quality of memories.
- One such study examined very positive and very negative memories in the lives of 108 college undergraduates (Waters et al., 2013).
- In events that were typically 3-5 years earlier, researchers found no significant difference in the coherence and quality of the memories.

Conclusion

- Research is divergent regarding the quality of memories related to traumatic events.
- In relation to Holocaust survivors, there is an added factor of variability in the quality of memory, given the significant expanse of time that has elapsed since World War II.
- Although some proponents of the trauma superiority theory have found a surprising level of accuracy in details surrounding life of survivors in the concentration camps, this research showed the relative inaccuracy of survivors' testimony of alleged and convicted Nazis.
- The implication for forensic investigation would appear to be that eyewitness testimony of traumatic events that occurred a long time ago should not be discarded outright -- but at the same time, it cannot be relied on as definitive.

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