



PERSONAL FLASHBULB MEMORIES IN YOUNG AND MIDDLE-AGED ADULTS

M.Megha *

MA Psychology University of Delhi (North Campus) *Corresponding Author

Dr. Nishi Misra

Defence Institute of Psychological Research, DRDO

ABSTRACT

The present paper aimed to explore the nature of personal flashback memories among young and middle-aged adults. The sample chosen for the same included two groups, the first falling in the age range of 21-24 (N=15) and the other falling in the age group of 50-62 (N=15). All participants were of Indian origin. The data was collected through the use of a survey consisting of three sections (demographic details, Social Readjustment Rating Scale, open-ended questionnaire). The results revealed that when it came to the recall of a specific event, the two groups had commonalities regarding losing a family member, and being in a risky or threatening situation. As for the other memories, it was observed that recall was related to life events experienced in that specific age group. For example, young adults recounted memories relating to academics, unrequited love, etc. whereas older adults recalled memories of childbirth, in-laws, etc.

KEYWORDS : Flashbulb, Middle-aged adults, Young adults

Introduction

The word 'flashbulb' indicates that these memories are seen to be possessing a 'photographic' quality, which can be attributed to the visual aspect and clarity of the reproduced/recalled image in the mind's eye. Brown & Kulik (1977) define flashback memories as "memories for the circumstances in which one first learned of a very surprising and consequential (or emotionally arousing) event". When it comes to flashback memories and age, Kvavilashvili et al. (2010) found that flashback memories produced no significant age effects for either phenomenological characteristics or test-retest consistency. Cohen, Conway, & Maylor (1994) found that different age groups also differed in the type of details remembered and in the relationship between the encoding and rehearsal variables and the occurrence of flashback memory. According to them, the age-related deficit in flashback memory is related to source amnesia and to a deficit in memory for context. Conway, Skitka, Hemmerich & Kershaw (2009) tested people's autobiographical memory for details of 11 September 2001. One of their findings revealed that memory consistency did not vary as a function of demographic variables such as age, gender, geographical location, or education. Given an understanding of the various concepts and literature regarding flashback memory, the present study chooses to operationally define it as a memory that one recalls vividly (in a picture like fashion) which holds personal importance to the individual, has some amount of surprise/shock and evokes a high level of emotional arousal. Since most of the literature on flashback memories revolves around world events such as 9/11, natural disasters, and assassinations, the rationale for the present study is to observe whether age differences exist between the flashback memories individuals may have regarding their personal lives.

Method

Sample

The participants chosen for this study were 15 young adults (5 males, 10 females) belonging to the age group of 20-25 years and 15 middle-aged adults (5 males, 10 females) belonging to the age group of 50-62 years (N=30). All participants were of Indian origin.

Measure

A Google form consisting of three sections was formulated for the present study. Section 1 consisted of basic demographic details. Section 2 comprised of the Social Readjustment Rating Scale by Holmes & Rahe (1967; different versions were given to the two age groups). Section 3 included an open-ended questionnaire that probed into two flashback memories, the associated emotions, impact in daily life, and reason(s) for recall.

Results

Table 1

Percentage of participants (N=30) falling under the different categories of risk for illness (Social Readjustment Rating Scale)

	Slight risk for illness (<150)	Moderate risk for illness (150-299)	High risk for illness (300+)
Young adults	60%	13.33%	26.67%
Middle-aged adults	33.33%	40%	26.67%

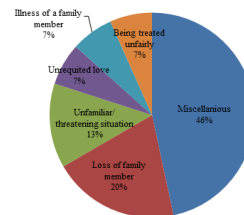


Figure 1. Types of memory events (young adults)

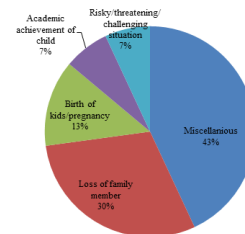
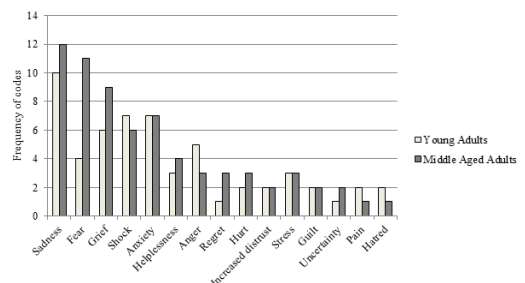
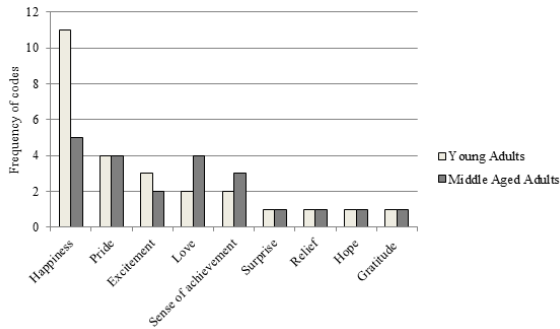


Figure 2. Types of memory events (middle-aged adults)

Graph 1: Common negative emotions of young and middle-aged adults



Graph 2: Common positive emotions of young and middle-aged adults

Discussion

The results revealed that when it came to the recall of a specific event, the two groups had commonalities regarding losing a family member and being in a risky or threatening situation. As for the other memories it was observed that recall was related to major life events experienced in that specific age group. For example, young adults recounted memories relating to academics, unrequited love, self-discovery, etc. (Figure 1). On the other hand, older adults recalled memories of childbirth, in-laws, academic achievement of their children, etc.

Common memory events

Loss of a family member. Six young adults reported the experience of losing a family member as one of their two memories. Four were related to losing a grandparent, and two were related to losing a cousin. Overall, most of the grief memories had some element of shock or unexpectedness. For some, they were recent memories, whereas for the others they weren't so recent however the intensity and details with which they were recalled indicate that they had indeed made a lasting impact on the individuals. Few of the participants had actually witnessed the death in front of them (*"I saw her breathing her last breath"*); Many think about them regularly and are still affected by the deaths (*"Till date, I cannot talk about him in retrospect... It's been three years"*). In the case of the middle-aged adults, the death of a family member was also a common event reported in the memories of the participants (N=9). The difference here between the two age groups was noticed in the sense of the person who passed away. With the younger group, it involved a grandparent or a cousin, whereas with the older group it majorly involved a parent or an in-law (and in one case, a cousin). There were no such obvious observed differences among the two age groups between the emotional content of the memories associated with losing a loved one. The older adults too reported similar reactions (e.g. *"There was a deep-felt gloom pervading the entire family and a feeling of the end of the world before me"*).

Unfamiliar/risky situation. With the young adults (N=3), they were all memories of early childhood. There were instances of nearly drowning, being stuck in a lift, crossing the road recklessly, and getting lost in a market. The emotions associated with these events were mostly around fear, restlessness, and panic. (*"I was panicking and crying, frantically pressing all buttons and then finally the lift opened and I got out"*). One participant even mentioned an incident of nearly drowning wherein she felt a sense of peace when she was underwater (*"Even though it was one which had my life at risk, the feeling of losing control seemed to be a very peaceful feeling"*).

With the middle-aged adults (N=2), the situations revolved around a young age but not that of early childhood like the other group. The memories were regarding being asked to fight in the Kargil war, and being stranded in a different city. The emotional facets of these memories were similar to those observed with the younger group-fear, helplessness, and a sense of risk (*"It was a very traumatic experience in my life as that affected my studies a lot"*). With the memory regarding the Kargil war, there was also a sense of

excitement for the participant as it was his first taste of conflict (*"...All the time I kept thinking what would happen and I was excited too since this is why I joined the forces, but that fear was still there in the back of my head"*).

Young adults

Certain memory events were specific to the different age groups. With the young adults, it was observed that unrequited love, being misunderstood, and illness of a family member were common. For unrequited love, one could claim that rejection, in general, is a painful and difficult event to experience. When it comes to something as fragile and emotional as young love it might lead to a high degree of emotional arousal. The factor of surprise or shock too could be present as the participants may have expected that their love would be reciprocated. Discussing hope in such a situation can be validated by Baumeister, Wotman & Stillwell's study (1993). They found that would-be lovers looked back with both positive and intensely negative emotions whereas rejectors had more of negative emotions regarding the event. On being treated unfairly, the intensity of humiliation and shame associated with these memories could be a reason that they are recalled so clearly and vividly. For illness of a family member, the emotions associated with both these memories were relating to helplessness, stress, and anxiety. Lewandowski (1992) studied the needs of children during the critical illness of a parent or sibling. They found that without informed and sensitive interventions the children may be at risk for significant long-term negative effects. This shows us that illness within a family can have important psychological effects on the minds of other members, especially young individuals.

Middle-aged adults

Some of the common memory events recalled were regarding birth/news of expecting their children, and the academic achievement of their children. The birth of a child is a milestone event in any adult's life. Since it is a significant moment in an adult's life, it could be a probable reason why a few participants recalled it vividly. As per the academic achievement of children the major associated emotions were that of pride and happiness. Kumar & Vellymalay (2011) found that Indian parents with a higher standard of education held higher educational aspirations regarding the academic achievement of their children. In the present study since the sample consisted of Indian participants and it is a known fact that majority of urban Indian parents do lay great emphasis on education, this could be a factor for such vivid recollection of positive academic achievement of their children.

Conclusion

Through this study one observes that there lie some common aspects when it comes to memory events of the young adults and the middle-aged adults. Regarding differences, one could claim that there was a slight difference in terms of experiences recalled, in a sense, they were relating more to the phase of life they were in.

This study does have some limitations. The Life Stress Inventory (Holmes & Rahe, 1967) is a western scale and may not be fully apt for the Indian population. The major issue here was that for the younger adults the scale did not have any option of "loss of family member" or "loss of grandparent" which led to inconsistency between their scores and responses as many reported losing their grandparents in the past year.

This study holds theoretical as well as clinical implications. Theoretically, it has provided more information and insight into the concept of personal flashback memories, something which hasn't been studied in much detail before, especially in the Indian context. Moreover, since many participants recounted negative and traumatic memories this study holds clinical implications in a sense it could be further extended to provide interventions and therapy for those who require it.

REFERENCES

1. Baumeister, R. F., Wotman, S. R., & Stillwell, A. M. (1993). Unrequited love: On

- heartbreak, anger, guilt, scriptlessness, and humiliation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 64, 377-394.
2. Brown, R., & Kulik, J. (1977). Flashbulb memories. *Cognition*, 5(1), 73-99.
 3. Cohen, G., Conway, M. A., & Maylor, E. A. (1994). Flashbulb memories in older adults. *Psychology and Aging*, 9(3), 454.
 4. Holmes, T.H., Rahe, R.H. (1967). The Social Readjustment Rating Scale. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 11(2), 213-8.
 5. Kumar, S., Vellymalay, N. (2011). A study of the relationship between Indian parents' education level and their involvement in their children's education. *Kajian Malaysia*, 29(2), 47-65.
 6. Kvavilashvili, L., Mirani, J., Schlagman, S., Erskine, J. A., & Kornbrot, D. E. (2010). Effects of age on phenomenology and consistency of flashbulb memories of September 11 and a staged control event. *Psychology and aging*, 25(2), 391.
 7. Lewandowski, L. A. (1992). Needs of children during the critical illness of a parent or sibling. *Critical care nursing clinics of North America*, 4(4), 573-585.