What’s Remembered Depends Upon How: Emotional Memory Structure as a Function of Social Context

Erica Kleinknecht  
*Pacific University*

Monica Richardet  
*Pacific University*

Stella Tran  
*Pacific University*

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What’s Remembered Depends Upon How: Emotional Memory Structure as a Function of Social Context

**Description**
Cognitive psychologists confidently answer “Yes” when asked “Can false memories be created?”, a question that deeply vexed us as little as 15 years ago. Yet today, a rich and ecologically valid body of research shows memory distortions are the rule, not the exception and that subjective experience like confidence has little to do with accuracy.

A current challenge to the field is an explication of just how social-contextual factors influence memory retrieval. A smattering of research suggests that conversation partner seems to matter and that retrieval mode seems to matter. While these studies are descriptive, they do not illustrate why these differences occur. Kleinknecht (2005) began to explore why by assessing the narrative structure of neutral personal event memories (PEMs) as a function of retrieval-mode (talk/type) and memory-type (PEMs/short stories resembling PEMs).

In real-world settings (i.e., court cases, therapy) where the validity and details of PEMs matters, the memories in question are emotional. Thus before generalizing these findings, Kleinknecht’s research must be replicated with emotional memories.

The outcome of such an assessment will have more than just applied value, in that it may also inform the debate on how emotion effect memory reports. Indeed, across studies evidence supports both the “Trauma Superiority Argument” (emotional memories are more vivid/complete) and the “Traumatic Memory Argument” (emotional memories are degraded) – two theoretical accounts that make opposing predictions.

As such, the present study was designed to replicate and extend Kleinknecht (2005) by comparing the structure of narratives for negative PEMs and for negative stories designed to resemble personal event narratives, where half the narrative were told to an interviewer and half were typed on a computer. As well, to further explore Pp experience of recalling memories vs. stories, Pp completed the Memory Characteristics Questionnaire after each narrative was reported.

**Disciplines**
Psychology

**Comments**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Cognitive psychologists confidently answer "Yes" when asked "Can false memories be created?" a question that deeply vexed us as little as 15 years ago. Yet, today, it's not simply the frequency, but also the sophistication and plausibility of such memories that are increasingly concerning. A growing body of research suggests that cognitive psychologists are not immune to false memory formation.

Retrieval mode seems to matter:
- Visual memories are less distinct than visual memories
- Written memories are more prominent.

This set of independent studies is descriptive, but it does not illuminate why these differences occur. Kleinknecht (2005) began investigating why by assessing the narrative structure of neutral personal event memories (PEMs) as a function of retrieval mode: PEMs (shorter stories resembling PEMs) and stories (longer stories resembling PEMs). Results (Kleinknecht 2005):
- PEM memories included more narrative details than their stories.
- The emotional impact on memory reports did differ.

These findings were taken to suggest that:
- Basic story and language production routines operationally assess memory recall.
- When telling about themselves, participants' emotion changes in social memories (talking vs. typing) is what did differ.
- Talking about yourself is a special kind of situation, where one includes more detail to facilitate understanding.

**THE PRESENT STUDY**

To extend the findings of Kleinknecht (2005) and to further investigate the role of retrieval mode, the current study was designed to replicate and extend Kleinknecht (2005) by comparing the structure of narratives for negative PEMs and for negative stories designed to resemble personal event memories, where narratives were told to an interviewer and typed on a computer.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The paradigm of such an assessment will have more than just applied value, as our study can inform the debate on the cognitive mechanisms underlying memory retrieval. Findings support both the "Traumatic Memory Argument" (emotional memories are more vivid/complete) and the "Passive Memory Argument" (emotional memories are degraded) - two theoretical accounts that make opposing predictions.

As such, the present study was designed to explore and extend Kleinknecht (2005) by comparing the structure of narratives for negative PEMs and for negative stories designed to resemble personal event memories, where narratives were told to an interviewer and typed on a computer.

In the current study, stories were selected for use in counterbalanced order. Pp were assigned to either the story or memory condition and were tested individually. After an overview, Pp brought to mind a recent negative emotional experience (within the last 2 years). For each experience, Pp were instructed to create a lengthy PEM story (not much detail to facilitate understanding).

**METHOD**

Participants & Design
- 16 participants were enrolled (13 female, 7 male)
- 4 stories (13 female, 7 male)
- 12 participants were assigned to either the story or memory condition

**RESULTS**

1. Negative PEM memories will include more structural and descriptive details than short stories.
2. Negative PEM and negative story memories will be similar in breadth.
3. The qualitative experience of recalling a negative PEM and a negative story will vary. However, there are no effects on whether to make emotional predictions about visual details (talking vs. typing) on MCQ ratings.

**HYPOTHESES**

- **Hypothesis 1:** Negative PEM memories will include more structural and descriptive details than short stories.
- **Hypothesis 2:** Negative PEM and negative story memories will be similar in breadth.
- **Hypothesis 3:** The qualitative experience of recalling a negative PEM and a negative story will vary. However, there are no effects on whether to make emotional predictions about visual details (talking vs. typing) on MCQ ratings.

**DISCUSSION**

The present study did not replicate Kleinknecht (2005), as expected. Collectively, however, these results inform the debate on the nature of the retrieval process. The current study did not find support for Kleinknecht's (2005) results, which suggested that narratives told to an interviewer are more vivid/complete than narratives typed on a computer. Instead, the study indicates that narratives typed on a computer are more vivid/complete than narratives told to an interviewer. This finding is consistent with the "Traumatic Memory Argument" (emotional memories are more vivid/complete).

The current study also examined the role of retrieval mode in the qualitative experience of recalling a negative PEM and a negative story. The findings supported this hypothesis, indicating that narratives typed on a computer are more vivid/complete than narratives told to an interviewer. This finding is consistent with the "Traumatic Superiority" argument.

In conclusion, the results of this study provide additional evidence for the "Traumatic Memory Argument." However, further research is needed to explore the potential moderating effects of retrieval mode on the qualitative experience of recalling a negative PEM and a negative story.