

Public Abstract

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Department: Psychology

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Title: Age differences in memory for names: The effect of pre-learned semantic associations

Research reveals that it is more difficult to remember names belonging to people than to remember other information about them, and that this is especially true for older adults. The purpose of the present dissertation is to examine a new technique designed to help both older and younger adults learn the names of newly-encountered people. Because it has been proposed that there is no direct link in memory between a face and name (e.g., Bruce & Young, 1986), the present experiments investigated whether participants could use other semantic information about a person (i.e., a *mediator*), such as an occupation, to indirectly link the name to the face.

In each of three experiments, older and younger adult participants pre-learned associations between semantic information (character information or occupations) and names. They then attempted to learn links between faces and either the names or semantic information that had been pre-learned. In the unmediated condition, participants learned only one piece of information (either the name or the semantic information) about each face, whereas in the mediated condition, they learned both the to-be-tested information as well as the mediator (i.e., both the name and the other semantic information). Experiment 1 showed that, at a simple level, both age groups could use character information (good or bad) to help remember names of people, given their faces, when instructed to do so. In Experiment 2, knowing the occupation associated with a name helped both age groups to later remember the name associated with a given face, when they were instructed to use this mediation technique. Experiment 3 showed that this effect occurred, although to a lesser degree, even when participants were not explicitly told to use the mediation technique.

Overall, the present experiments show that both younger and older participants can use semantic information about a person (i.e., a mediator), such as an occupation, to improve their memory for names given the presentation of a face. These studies also elucidate the need for further investigation of a useful new technique which may help both older and younger adults to better learn names of people.