

AGE DIFFERENCES IN MEMORY FOR NAMES:
THE EFFECT OF PRE-LEARNED SEMANTIC ASSOCIATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The present experiments investigated whether participants could use basic semantic information about a person (i.e., a “mediator”), such as an occupation, to help link that person’s name to his or her face. In each of three experiments, older and younger adults pre-learned associations between semantic information about fictional people (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 people’s names, 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.