Involuntary Memory: The Proust Effect

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Involuntary memory is a conception of human memory in which cues encountered in everyday life evoke recollections of the past without conscious effort. Its binary opposite, voluntary memory, is a deliberate effort to recall the past. The term was coined by French author Marcel Proust. From this philosophical root, involuntary memory has become a part of modern psychology.

Although involuntary memory is commonly connected to the literature of Marcel Proust, it had long before been recognized by psychologists, most notably, the pioneering memory researcher Hermann Ebbinghaus. Writing about it in the first scientific study of memory, Ebbinghaus described the basis of both involuntary and voluntary memory, providing a groundwork for generations of memory researchers that followed. (see Hermann Ebbinghaus Memory: A contribution to experimental psychology.)

Marcel Proust

Involuntary memory (fr. souvenir involontaire) is a concept made famous by the French writer Marcel Proust in his novel In Search of Lost Time (or Remembrance of Things Past), although the idea was also developed in his earlier writings, Contre Sainte-Beuve and Jean Santeuil. It is, thus, sometimes referred to as "Proustian memory."

Proust contrasts involuntary memory with voluntary memory. The latter designates memories retrieved by "intelligence," that is, memories produced by putting conscious effort into remembering events, people, and places. Proust's narrator laments that such memories are inevitably partial, and do not bear the "essence" of the past. The most famous instance of involuntary memory by Proust is known as the "episode of the madeleine," yet there are at least half a dozen other examples, as in In Search of Lost Time, including such distinct memories produced by the scent of a public lavatory on the Champs-Élysées.

The function of involuntary memory in the novel, however, is not self-evident. It has been argued that involuntary memory unlocks the Narrator's past as the subject of his novel, but also that he does not, for example, begin writing until many years after the episode of the madeleine. Other critics have suggested that it is not the recovery of the past, per se, that is significant for the Narrator, but rather the happiness produced by his recognition of the past in a present moment. Maurice Blanchot in Le Livre ? venir points out that involuntary memories are empyreal and poignant, and cannot effectively support a sustained narrative. He notes that the difference between Proust's uncompleted Jean Santeuil and In Search of Lost Time is that voluntary memories provide the connective tissue between such moments, making up the vast bulk of the narrative of the later novel.

A possible contemporary influence on Proust's conception of involuntary memory may have been his cousin-in-law, the French philosopher Henri Bergson, who, in Matter and Memory (1906), made

a distinction between two types of memory, one, the habit of memory as in learning a poem by heart, and two, the spontaneous memory that stores up perceptions and impressions, which later reveals itself in sudden flashes. Critique of Proust in the last quarter century, however, has tended to discount the influence of Bergson on Proust's ideas.

Developmental psychology

In psychological research, involuntary memory was systematically studied by Soviet psychologists who investigated primarily the interrelation between specific human activity (other than deliberate remembering), the place of the material to be remembered, and the qualitative and quantitative characteristics of recall. The pioneer of the research in this field was the student of Vygotsky and Leont'ev, and one of the leading representatives of the Soviet school of psychology, Pyotr Zinchenko, who published the results of his study as early as 1939. The distinction between involuntary and voluntary memory (i.e. such memory that results from deliberate memorization as opposed to memory as a by-product of other, non-mnemonic activity) was subsequently developed by such Soviet psychologists as Smirnov, Istomina, Shlychkova, and particularly, by such representatives of Kharkov School of Psychology as P. Zinchenko, Repkina, Sereda, Bocharova, Ivanova, &c.

Soviet research on involuntary memory significantly influenced psychological research in the West. A wide range of European and North American studies on involuntary remembering in children (e.g. by Meacham, Murphy and Brown, Sophian & Hagen, Schneider, Reese, Ivanova & Nevoennaya, Mistry, Rogoff & Herman) demonstrated viability and promise of the activity-based model of human memory.

Experimental psychology

Despite the early recognition of involuntary memory, such as by Ebbinghaus, mainstream (experimental) psychology neglected its study for a century, focusing more on voluntary and other types of memory. Near the end of the twentieth century, however, the concept was reintroduced to memory researchers by Linton (1986), Schacter (1987), and Schank (1982). The first scientific studies were conducted by Berntsen (1996) and Richardson-Klavehn, Gardiner, and Java (1994); Then, more recently, by Ball and Little (2006), Kvavilashvili and Mandler (2004), and Mace (2004).

Scientific psychological interest in the topic of involuntary memory is a bit different from the interests of other circles (e.g., literary or psychoanalytic) in that, generally, scientific circles are attempting to understand the basic nature of everyday involuntary memories (including their possible functions), as well as use of them to learn more about the basic functioning of autobiographical memory (including voluntary memory, see Mace, 2007, for a review of the past ten years of research).