



## Autobiographical memories for negative and positive events in war contexts



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### ABSTRACT

The aim of the present study was to examine the phenomenological qualities of self-reported negative and positive memories. The study was conducted in the Gaza Strip, Palestine, and a total of 134 autobiographical memories about negative and positive events were analyzed using a version of the Phenomenological Questionnaire for Autobiographical Memory (Manzanero & López, 2007). Participants were university students, 80 percent were women and 20 percent were men. Results showed that negative memories are more confused, more complex, and decay more over time than positive ones. In contrast, no differences were found between positive and negative memories on sensory information, spatial location, vividness, definition, accessibility, fragmentation, recall perspective, doubts about the accuracy of the memory, and how much participants recovered and talked about the event. High Dimensional Visualization (HDV) graph revealed that there were individual differences between negative and positive memories but no consistent differences across participants.

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### Los recuerdos autobiográficos de los sucesos negativos y positivos en contextos bélicos

#### RESUMEN

El objetivo del presente estudio fue evaluar mediante auto-informe las características fenomenológicas de los recuerdos negativos y positivos. El estudio se llevó a cabo en la Franja de Gaza, Palestina, y se analizaron un total de 134 recuerdos autobiográficos sobre eventos negativos y positivos utilizando una versión del Cuestionario de Características Fenomenológicas de Recuerdos Autobiográficos (Manzanero y López, 2007). Los participantes eran estudiantes universitarios, 80 por ciento mujeres y 20 por ciento hombres. Los resultados mostraron que los recuerdos negativos fueron más confusos, más complejos y más deteriorados que los positivos. Por el contrario, no se encontraron diferencias entre los recuerdos positivos y negativos en información sensorial, localización espacial, viveza, definición, accesibilidad, fragmentación, perspectiva de recuperación, dudas sobre la exactitud de la memoria y cantidad de veces que los participantes recuperaron y hablaron sobre el evento. El gráfico de Visualización Híper-Dimensional (HDV) muestra que existen diferencias individuales entre los recuerdos negativos y positivos, pero no hay diferencias consistentes entre los participantes.

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In a review of traumatic memories, Brewin (2007) proposed that the controversies relating to this type of memories could be summarized into four main contentious issues. First, whether these memories are different from other types of autobiographical memories. Second, whether traumatic memories are more or less

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accurate from memories for non-traumatic events. Third, whether these memories can be forgotten and remembered later in life and, finally, whether there are special mechanisms responsible for this forgetting, perhaps repression mechanisms. These controversies can be further divided into two main issues (Manzanero & Recio, 2012). The first one relates to the extent to which negative autobiographical memories are indeed different from other types of autobiographical memory in terms of either their characteristics or accuracy. The second relates to the accessibility of this kind of autobiographical memory.

In terms of accessibility, Porter and Birt (2001) found that memories for negative events are remembered more frequently than other autobiographical memories. In the few cases in which these episodes were forgotten (4.6%) this was due to a deliberate attempt not to recall the memory rather than having forgotten the memory, a finding that supports the suggestion that in those cases where memories for negative events are forgotten it is mainly due to *suppression* rather than *repression* (Ost, 2009; McNally, 2003). However, other research shows that some suppressed memories are not actually suppressed but they are the result of a meta-memory failure that leads participants to forget that they had recovered the autobiographical information previously (Woodworth et al., 2009) or because participants tend to forget prior recoveries of the event which produces the illusion of having had amnesic episodes (Geraerts, McNally, Jelicic, Merckelbach, & Raymaekers, 2008). In any case, it seems that memories of negative events are more affected by retrieval-induced forgetting than by the memories of positive events (Harris, Sharman, Barnier, & Moulds, 2010) and are easily implanted or distorted (Paz-Alonso & Goodman, 2008). Indeed, several studies show memories for negative events are more accessible than others and due to the frequency of recovery they are more susceptible to distortion, and therefore less accurate (Ost, Vrij, Costall, & Bull, 2002; Rubin, Boals, & Berntsen, 2008; Talarico & Rubin, 2003, 2007). Assessing whether negative memories are less accurate however is not as straightforward as it may seem. Research shows for instance that negative memories are characterized by higher accuracy for central details but less accuracy for peripheral details (Christianson, 1992; Schmidt, 2004).

Studies have used a range of questionnaires to examine phenomenological characteristics of emotional memories such as the Memory Characteristics Questionnaire (Johnson, Foley, Suengas, & Raye, 1988) or the Emotional Experiences Questionnaire (EEQ; Porter & Birt, 2001). These questionnaires allow the exploration of specific features of the memories such as vividness, fragmentation, doubts, amount of details, sensory information, etc. One of the first studies looking at phenomenological characteristics of memories for negative events (Tromp, Koss, Figueredo, & Tharan, 1995) concluded that these memories, compared to other types of memories, were less clear and vivid, less well remembered, more thought and talked about and had less visual detail. Byrne, Hyman, and Scott (2001) in contrast found that memories for negative events were only different in that they tend to be reported as having less sensory information.

Sotgiu and Mormont (2008) suggest that the presence of mixed evidence may relate to the different methodologies employed in each study. First, studies differ in the type of questionnaires used. Second, they differ in the samples employed, which go from psychology undergraduate students who have experienced few negative events to clinical populations with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Third, studies vary in the time elapsed since the event took place. It is therefore difficult to make direct comparisons between studies in order to explain contradictory findings.

One of the most important factors associated to memory is the stress that may be associated with the event. This is indicated by all those studies warning of its influence on memory (Kim & Diamond,

2002; McEwen, 2000). However, its effect on the memories of negative events is complex (Berliner, Hyman, Thomas, & Fitzgerald, 2003; Peace, Porter, & Brinke, 2007; Wagenaar & Groeneweg, 1990). Stressful traumatic experiences could produce the sensation of intense, vivid, and persistent memories. At the same time, stress produces a significant impairment of attention and memory processes. However, the experience of stress (and the development of PTSD) is not only a function of the characteristics of the event lived but how each person perceives and reacts to negative stimulus (Saigh, Yasik, Mitchell, & Abright, 2011), which in turn is based on different factors (King, King, Foy, Keane, & Fairbank, 1999; Nemeroff et al., 2006), such as resilience, which favor the ability to deploy coping strategies necessary for the person to respond to the negative stimulus without seriously disrupting their balance and therefore minimizing the effect on memory or attention. Studies have shown, for example, that child soldiers show different degrees of resilience, which was an indicator of absence of posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, and clinically significant emotional and behavioral problems (Klasen et al., 2010). Similarly, emotion regulation could play a role in emotional responses (Punamäki, Peltonen, Diab, & Qouta, 2014), which in turn would be the basis of differences between positive and negative memories.

In the present study we aimed to test one sample of university undergraduate students from the Gaza Strip in Palestine who are regularly subjected to negative experiences because they live in a prolonged war context and have, therefore, high levels of stress. The aim was to explore whether the phenomenological characteristics of the memories for negative and positive events differed. It was difficult to establish specific hypotheses *a priori* because, as mentioned above, most of the studies on traumatic or negative memories analyze unique events that take place in hardly comparable contexts.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 114 students of the University of Al-Aqsa and the University of Al-Azhar in the Gaza Strip (Palestine). The research project was interrupted by the Israeli attacks on Gaza between December 2008 and January 2009, which partly destroyed the universities. For this reason 47 participants could not complete the study. To avoid biasing the results, only the data collected before December 2008 was included in the study. The final sample comprised 67 university students, 54 women (ages 17–36, mean age 22.32,  $SD=4.30$ ) and 13 men (ages 18–36, mean age 24.38,  $SD=5.23$ ).

### Procedure

Following the procedure described by Johnson et al. (1988), participants were first asked to write a description of two personal past events, one negative and one positive, that happened at a similar time in their life. They were told negative events included traumatic, unpleasant events and positive events happy, pleasant memories that would have had important implications for them. For negative events they were told they could be events such as deaths, accidents, or aggressions. For positive events, weddings, births, or an important achievement could be considered. It was important that participants did not withhold information of the event for fear of embarrassment or judgment. Participants were therefore told explicitly that they would not have to hand these descriptions and that they served only as prompts to their memory. Once they completed the description of the event, participants filled in the questionnaire.

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