Although it might seem a good idea to work with other people to remember important information, the evidence suggests that this typically isn’t so. Individual recall is most efficient whereas social remembering comes with drawbacks, tripping up our flow and inhibiting memories. But this evidence mostly comes from asking people to collaborate with a stranger. What happens when you know each other really, really well? Celia Harris and colleagues at Macquarie University recently reviewed their previously published and new research on social remembering by long-term intimate couples. Their data showed that on standard tests, such as reproducing words from studied lists, couples working together often did as well as when they worked alone. This lack of a penalty from social remembering is itself notable, but it’s just a gateway into more intriguing findings. During another study, the researchers noticed that although couples did more poorly at listing their shared holidays when recalling together, these social sessions were filled with anecdotes and tangents that weren’t generated in the solo sessions. This inspired them to depart from testing memory for lists of words and events, and to explore the intertwined amount of rich, in-depth information remembered by couples about experienced events. They found these social exchanges led to clear collaborative memory benefits, which they summarize as follows:

1. New information’ such as finally snapping an elusive name of a musical thanks to a chain of prompts between the two parties.
2. Richer, more vivid descriptions of events including sensory information.
3. Information from one partner painting things in a new light for the other.

Differences between the couples were crucial. Those who structured their approach together and were more prepared to riff off the other’s contributions did better than those who were more passive or critical. Richer events were also better remembered by partners who rated their intimacy as higher. The authors note that older adults tend to experience the greatest memory difficulties with firsthand autobiographical information, rather than abstracted facts. This is exactly where the couples gained the biggest benefit from remembering together, as evidenced by performance on the in-depth event recall task and the spontaneously emerging anecdotes. It’s possible that as we grow older, we offset the unreliability of our own episodic systems by drawing on the memory support offered by our partners. Mere presence of a loved one can make the most Bond-like of stories more plausible.

One of psychology’s most famous experiments was seriously flawed

In Teaching of Psychology

Conducted in 1971, the Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE) has acquired a mythical status and provoked the inspiration for at least two feature-length films. You’ll recall that several university students allocated to扮演 the role of jailor turned brutal and the study had to be aborted prematurely. Philip Zimbardo, the experiment’s lead investigator, says the liaison from the research is that in certain situations, good people readily turn bad. If you put good apples into a bad situation, you’ll get bad apples,” he has written. The SPE was criticised back in the 70s, but that criticism has noticeably escalated and widened in recent years. New details to emerge show that Zimbardo played a key role in encouraging his ‘guards’ to behave in tyrannical fashion. Critics have pointed out that only one third of guards behaved sadistically; this argues against the overwhelming power of the situation. Question marks have also been raised about the self-selection of participants, the lack of control over data. Let’s teach them on each of these.

It would be interesting to compare coverage of the SPE in standard textbooks with one to seven paragraphs of coverage in introductory textbooks. Certainly there are contemporary books by British psychologists that do provide more in-depth critical coverage of the SPE.

Griggs’ advice for textbook authors is to provide coverage of the SPE in the research methods chapter (instead of under social psychology), and to use the experiment’s flaws as a way to introduce students to key issues such as ecological validity, ethics, demand characteristics and subsequent conflicting results. ‘In sum,’ he writes, ‘the SPE and its criticisms comprise a solid thread to weave numerous research concepts together into a good “story” that would not only enhance student learning but also lead students to engage in critical thinking about the research process and all of the possible pitfalls along the way.’

Happy together now?

In the Journal of Happiness Studies

It’s become a mantra of the modern Western world that the ultimate aim of life is to achieve happiness. Self-help blog posts on how to be happy are almost guaranteed popularity (the Digest has its own!). Pro-happiness organisations have appeared, such as Action for Happiness, which aims to ‘create a happier society for everyone’. Topping it all, an increasing number of governments, including in the UK, have started measuring national well-being (seen as a proxy for happiness) – the argument being that this is a potentially more important policy outcome than economic prosperity.

But hang on a minute, say Moshen Joshanloo and Dan Weijers writing in the Journal of Happiness Studies – not everyone wants to be happy. In fact, they point out that many people, including in Western cultures, deliberately dampen their positive moods. Looking into the reasons for happiness aversion, Joshanloo and Weijers identify four: believing that being happy will provoke bad things to happen; that happiness will make you a worse person, that expressing happiness is bad for you and others; and that pursuing happiness is bad for you and others.

Fear that happiness leads to bad outcomes is perhaps the SPE in East Asian cultures influenced by Taoism, which posits that ‘things tend to revert to their opposite’. A 2001 study asked participants to choose from a range of life-course graphs and found that Chinese people were more likely than Americans to choose graphs that showed periods of sadness following periods of joy. Other cultures, such as Japan and Iran, believe that happiness can bring misfortune as it causes inattentiveness. Similar fears are sometimes found in the West as reflected in adages such as ‘What goes up must come down.’

Belief that being happy makes you a worse person is rooted in some interpretations of Islam, the reasoning being that it distracts you from God. Joshanloo and Weijers quote the Prophet Muhammad: ‘You’re to know what I know, you would laugh little and weep much!’ And ‘much laughter deadens the heart.’ Another relevant belief here is the idea that being unhappy makes people more creative. Consider this quote from Edward Monk: ‘They [emotional suffering] are part of me and my art. They are indistinguishable from me ... I want to keep these sufferings.’

In relation to the overt expression of happiness, a 2009 study found that Japanese participants frequently mentioned that doing so can harm others, for example by making them envious. Americans rarely held such concerns. In Italk culture in Micronesia, meanwhile, Joshanloo and Weijers note that expressing happiness is ‘associated with showing off, overexcitement, and failure at doing one’s duties.’

Finally, the pursuit of happiness is believed by many cultures and philosophies to be harmful to the self and others. Take as an example this passage of Buddhist text: ‘And with every desire for happiness, out of delusion they destroy their own well-being as if it were their enemy’. In Western thought, as far back as Epicurus, warnings are given that the direct pursuit of happiness can backfire on the self, and harm others through excessive self-interest. Also, it’s been shown that focusing on happiness can make the opposite worse and less likely to fight injustice.

There’s a contemporary fixation with happiness in the much of the Western world. Joshanloo and Weijers’ counterpoint is that, for various reasons, not everyone wants to be happy. From a practical perspective, they say this could seriously skew cross-cultural comparisons of subjective well-being. ‘It stands to reason’, they write, ‘that a person with an aversion to expressing happiness…may report lower subjective wellbeing than they would do otherwise.’ But their concerns go deeper: ‘There are risks for happiness studies in exporting Western psychology to non-Western cultures without undertaking in-depth analyses, including making invalid cross-cultural comparisons and imposing Western cultural assumptions on other cultures.’
How You can do it!" beats "I can do it!"

In the European Journal of Social Psychology

The material in this section is taken from the Society’s Research Digest blog at www.researchdigest.org.uk/blog, and is written by its editor Dr Christian Jarrett and contributors, for example, Dr Alex Fradera. Visit the blog for full coverage including references and links, additional current reports, an archive, comment and more.

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We know self-talk can help people’s self-control (e.g. ‘Don’t do it!’) and boost their morale (e.g. ‘Hang in there!’) in sporting situations. However, before now, no one has investigated whether self-talk is more effective depending on whether you refer to yourself in the grammatical first person (i.e. ‘I can do it!’) or the second person (i.e. ‘You can do it!’).

Sanda Dolcos and her team first asked 15 psychology undergraduates to imagine they were a character in a short story. The character is faced with a choice, and the participants are asked to write down the advice they would give themselves in this role, to help make the choice. Crucially, half the participants were instructed to use the first-person ‘I’ in their self-advice, the others to use the second-person ‘You’. Right after, the participants completed a series of anagrams. Those who’d given their fictional selves advice using ‘You’ completed more anagrams than those who’d used the first-person ‘I’ (17.53 average completion rate vs. 15.96).

A second study with 143 more psychology students was conducted, but similar to this time, the students gave themselves self-advice specifically in relation to completing anagrams, and this time the researchers finished up the study by tapping the students’ attitudes to anagrams, and their intentions to complete more in the future. Students who gave themselves self-advice in the second-person managed to complete more anagrams, and they said they would be happier to work on more in the future (as compared with students who used the first-person, or a control group who did not give themselves advice). The greater success rate for the second-person students was mediated by their more positive attitudes.

Future work should examine ways to actually training people to strategically use second-person advice to improve their self-regulation, they said.

Many readers will likely be disappointed by the dependence of purely psychology student volunteers. You might wonder to what extent writing down self-advice is truly equivalent to real self-talk, and maybe you’ll have doubts about the extent to which anagram performance and exercising intentions tells us about potential effects in the real world. Another issue is that the study didn’t investigate people’s preferences for self-talk – is it a rule that second-person self-talk is superior for everyone? Can you work out any other strategies to help you make the right decisions?

How your mood changes your personality

In BMC Psychology

Except in extreme cases of illness or trauma, we usually expect each other’s personalities to remain stable through life. Indeed, central to the definition of personality is that it describes pervasive tendencies in a person’s behaviour and ways of relating to the world. However, a new study highlights the reality – your personality is swayed by your current mood, especially when you’re feeling down.

Jan Quengelbägger and Sebastian Schindler twice measured the personality of 98 participants (average age 22; 67 per cent female), with a month between each assessment. Before one of the assessments, the participants either watched a 10-minute video designed to make them feel sad, or to make them feel happy. The sad clip was from film Philadelphia and Barber’s Adagio for Strings was also added into the mix. The happy video showed families reunited after the fall of the Berlin Wall, together with Mozart’s Eine kleine Nacht Musik. Before their other personality assessment, the participants watched a neutral video about people with extreme skills.

When participants answered questions about their personalities in a sad state, they scored ‘considerably higher on trait neuroticism, and moderately lower on extraversion and agreeableness, as compared with when they completed the questionnaires in a neutral mood state. There was also a trend for participants to score higher on extraversion when in a happy mood, but this didn’t reach statistical significance.’ The weaker effect of happy mood on personality may be because people’s supposed mood (after the neutral video) was already happy. Alternatively, perhaps sad mood really does have a stronger effect on personality scores than happy mood. This makes sense given we’re more likely to notice changes in behaviour when they’re down. With strangers though, it’s easy to forget these effects and assume that their behaviour derives from fixed personality rather than temporary mood.

Although this research appears to challenge the notion of personality as fixed, the results, ifheedled, could actually help us drill down to a person’s underlying long-term traits. As Quengelbägger and Schindler explained, ‘becoming aware of participants’ emotional state and paying attention to the possible implications on testing could lead to a notable increase in the stability of assessed personality traits’.

LINK FEAST

Getting Over Procrastination
Maria Konnikova with an overview of some fascinating genetic research. tinyurl.com/jgdvks

Is one of the Most Popular Psychology Experiments Worthless?
Olga Khanz at The Atlantic asks whether it’s time to retire the ‘trolley problem’ used in so many moral psychology experiments. tinyurl.com/lwyhwp

The Trouble with Brain Science
The problem, argues Gary Marcus, is that we yet to achieve a breakthrough that bridges psychology and neuroscience. tinyurl.com/kij474

Psychological treatments: A call for mental-health science
‘Clinicians and neuroscientists must work together to understand and improve psychological treatments’ – argues clinical psychologist Emily Holmes et al. in a Nature comment piece. tinyurl.com/jg8ggb

Why sports psychologists couldn’t save Brazil
Angela Patmore argues that the Brazilian World Cup team was given flawed advice – they were encouraged to relax, rather than trained to increase their mental resilience.

‘Wisdom of the crowd’: The myths and realities
Philip Balmuir summarises research that tells us when crowds are smart and when they’re dumb. To boost group intelligence, he says, add new members who are as different as possible from the current set.

When you’re depressed, you feel a disconnect from your body, your relationships and your past. That’s according to interviews with seven therapy clients – three women and four men – who’d been diagnosed with depression for the first time. Researchers hope the insights will help therapists talk to their clients about the condition.

Cool kids’ don’t fare so well when they reach early adulthood.
Researchers found that popular, precarious 13-year-olds who engaged in minor acts of rebellion were, in their early 20s, more likely than their peers to be involved in criminal and have relationship problems. (In Child Development)

People tend not to like spending time alone with their own thoughts, according to a series of provocative studies. In one, 67 per cent of men said they would pay to avoid a mild electric shock subsequently chose to shock themselves during a 15-minute period of quiet contemplation. (In Science)

Neurosurgeons have identified a small area, buried deep near the front of the brain, that appears to act like an ‘on/off switch’ for consciousness. The discovery was made while applying electrical stimulation to the brain of a woman with intractable epilepsy, in the search for the locus of her seizures. (In Epilepsy and Behavor)

Well-being at work tends to dip when people are in their 30s, now researchers think they know why. A survey of hundreds of employees in the Australian construction industry uncovered that this period of life is associated with less support from co-workers and increased time pressure. (In Journal of Occupational Health Psychology)

Full reports are available at www.researchdigest.org.uk/blog

DIGEST DIGESTED

10,000 hours of practice is no guarantee for greatness according to an analysis of elite chess players and musicians. Ameunt of ‘deliberate practice’ was found to account for 34 per cent of variance in chess performance and 30 per cent of variance in musical ability. (In the journal Intelligence)