



THE INFLUENCE OF MANIPULATIONS ON INDIVIDUAL AND GENERAL MEMORY: SPECIFICS OF CURRENT LIFE SITUATION PERCEPTION AND INTERPRETATION OF THE FUTURE

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***Abstract:** Social interaction can make a great impact on a person's memory. This property can have positive and negative effects, as it helps to expand the possibilities of memorization as well as causes the distortion of real memories. In this regard, the authors aimed to explore the features of collective memory and identify possible consequences of manipulative influence on memories. The participants of the experiment were divided into one control and two experimental groups. In the experimental groups, the manipulative teacher intervention was used in two variants of expression: optimistically carefree or anxious-pessimistic. The control group received a neutral version of the instructions. Participants wrote an essay on memory about their experience of quarantine related to the spread of coronavirus in Ukraine. It was found that manipulations affect even recent memories. The manipulations also affected the respondents' assessment of the possible future to a greater extent*

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than Their memories of the past. It has been proven that manipulative influence on the memories of socially significant events significantly affects the individual diversity of memories reducing them to a given template.

Keywords: *collective memory; collective trauma; commemoration; mnemonic convergence; memory manipulation*

1. Introduction

Almost a hundred years ago, M. Halbwachs (2007) argued that memory is generated both by an individual and by a particular group that unites it. The “implantation” of memory from one person to another is quite easy in direct personal interaction, including with professional storytellers, “thought leaders”, lecturers, guides, etc. Indirect but broader influences are the carriers of shared memory: texts, works of art, cultural symbols, monuments and artefacts, the so-called “places of memory”. This led to a scientific search for the social conditions for the formation of individual memories, as well as the problems of collective memory. Although these issues are actively discussed by historians, philosophers, culture scientists, sociologists and psychologists, they are still far from being resolved. This problem is especially acute in the case of manipulative effects on memory, which makes a person hostage to the interests of others. Unfortunately, this phenomenon has become common in Ukraine: information wars (foreign and domestic political), destruction of monuments in the process of ideological struggle, historical amnesia and “conflicts of memory”, dissemination of false and unreliable information in official sources, etc.

The social significance of the topic is that the doctrine of collective memory is extremely convenient for achieving ideological (propaganda) goals. Global processes of democratisation of society have led to the desire of individual social groups to establish and defend their own identity by finding “their own vision of the past” (Kis, 2010). From the point of view of the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, the current problems of the state are the conjunctural use of memorial issues: the commercialisation of public memory, its exploitation by political forces, the substitution of objective analysis of the problem by myth-making or stereotyping. The consequence of these processes is “egocentrism in interpretations of the past” – the removal of group and individual memories from the national narrative. “Often, political and pseudo-scientific conclusions about collective memory only deepen society's moral and psychological vulnerability to the complex and painful pages of the past” (Volyanyuk, 2009). Thus, the collective memory from the educational and adaptive resource becomes an instrument of gross manipulation of the mass consciousness.

In this situation, it is psychology that is able to combine the disparate data of individual sciences and formulate an unbiased view of shared memory as a socio-cognitive process. The authors see the main task in the use of collective memory resources to ensure the best adaptation of an individual, as well as protection from manipulative

information influences. The purpose of this study is to identify the consequences of manipulative influence on students' memories of socially significant events. This will help to elucidate the socio-cognitive mechanisms of shared memory and will form the basis of further theoretical and empirical research.

An extremely complex and debatable area of research is the shared memory of important historical events. The basic idea of the concept of collective memory is that each social group produces a specific type of memory, the carriers of which are its members. It reflects the idea of what unites the members of this group. Usually, collective memories refer to events and personalities that have significant value and emotional load – heroic, or, conversely, traumatic, which causes the risks of “collective self-deception” (Emelianova, 2012). In terms of the accuracy of displaying specific events, memory is not a reliable source. P. Nora (1999) spoke clearly about this: “Memory is a life, which is always carried by living social groups, and in this sense, it is in the process of constant evolution, it is open to the dialectic of memorisation and amnesia, does not realise its successive deformations, subject to all use and manipulation, capable of long latent periods and sudden recovery... It feeds on hazy, multifaceted, global and fluid, partial or symbolic memories, it is sensitive to all transfers, reflections, prohibitions or projections.” Memory unconsciously maintains a connection with the past in the context of the present; due to its sensual and magical nature, it adapts only to those details that are convenient to it (Nora, 1999).

2. Literature Review

Socio-cognitive distortions of memories of significant events have been the subject of active research by psychologists in recent years. Specialists focus on dialogic (shared, shared) memorisation and mnemonic convergence (commemoration), which adjusts a person's own memories, aligning them with a particular general socio-cultural or historical context. Today, there is compelling empirical evidence of the positive impact of social interactions, which eliminates the shortcomings of individual memory and expands the possibilities of memory (Harris et al., 2011; Maswood et al., 2019; Vestner et al., 2019). On the other hand, there are known negative effects that distort real memories, especially in situations of emotional vulnerability: false testimony of witnesses and victims of crimes, “restored” memories of childhood traumas, etc. (Loftus, 2005).

The processes of social infection, when information from an external source is included in individual memory and remembered out of connection with its primary source, as well as induced effects of forgetting, when the interference of certain information in memory causes blocking of other memories, were studied (Anderson et al., 1994; Coman et al., 2009). J.K. Yamashiro and W. Hirst (2020) showed how central speakers (politicians, public figures, journalists) contribute to the convergence of collective memories and how perceived membership in social groups affects these mnemonic effects.

Relational motives that motivate a person to seek commonality and unity with others also determine the ways of forming memories, namely, making efforts to construct some “common past”. In this sense, collective memory is an important resource of

collective identity: family, corporate, civic, national, ethnic, religious, etc. It enhances the internal adaptive capacity of an individual by joining an extra-personal resource, and also significantly affects group dynamics, ensuring social cohesion and solidarity (Fagin et al., 2013). It is known that awareness of one's own socio-psychological traits as a member of a certain group provides a high level of integrativeness of this group (Bochelyuk, 2014). It is interesting to note that man would not be able to survive as a species and achieve everything he currently has without the ability to unite through the formation, maintenance and dissemination of collective memories and appropriate social identification (Fagin, 2018).

All this presupposes a large layer of practice-oriented research aimed at finding the best ways to present socially important information and build trust in its disseminators. To evoke relationally motivated mnemonic convergence, a speaker must ensure a certain level of coincidence of social identity with the persons to whom the information is addressed. M. Fagin (2018) emphasises that a person is a set of different identities, each of which has its own reservoir of collective memory – so it is important to “address” the identity that is most activated at the time of perception of the message.

The nature of memorising or displacing information from memory is determined not only by the level of expertise/competence of the source, but also by identifying it as “one's own”. Experiments in the student environment (Coman & Hirst, 2015) demonstrated pronounced effects of mnemonic convergence with individuals identified as classmates and the lack of response to the report of representatives of the “competing” university. The mnemonic consensus is more common between speakers and listeners if they belong to the same social group. Prejudiced people, on the other hand, are more likely to forget the experience of interacting with dissimilar people, which influences subsequent acts of memorisation (Coman & Hirst, 2012). On the other hand, long-term collaboration and interaction contribute to the coherence of views on the past – increasing the number of shared memories, as well as their overall organisation and architecture (Congleton & Rajaram, 2014). The downside of these processes is an increase in susceptibility to misleading memories: groups of friends easily trust the memories of others and remember them firmly (Peker & Tekcan, 2009).

The collective traumas included in the context of shared memory deserve special attention. Over the last century, many emotionally difficult events in the life of Ukrainians have significantly changed the way of life and thinking of generations: the Holodomor, World War II, the Chernobyl disaster, the Revolution of Dignity, military aggression by Russia and others. The question of their mental consequences for the Ukrainian community is acute. L.A. Naydonova (2012) described the mechanisms of transgenerational transmission of collective trauma in related systems. P.P. Gornostay (2015) suggested psychotherapeutic ways to overcome historical trauma. Of course, this work needs to be deepened and continued.

In the context of traumatic memories, collective processes of commemoration usually help to reconcile contradictions in perceptions of the past, reduce the destructive effects and traumas, and develop a certain general view that serves as a lesson for future generations. Socio-cultural strategies of selecting events for memorisation or forgetting, for worship or condemnation act in the same way as the protective mechanisms of the

psyche (forgetting, rejection, rationalisation, etc.). Individual memories of participants may change over time under the influence of social representations, official historical narratives, frequency of mention and other factors (Coman et al., 2009; Hirst et al., 2015; Psaltis, 2016). At the same time, it opens the way to psychological manipulation. If a certain version of the past is considered the only correct one, attempts to critically analyse it are seen as a “separation” from the group, which finally leads to silences and distortions (Obradović, 2016). R. Garagozov (2016) warns that certain types of collective memory formed in social conflicts can have a stronger emotional impact than individual memories, causing painful reactions in people who were not directly involved in the events.

It should be understood that the representation of the past is always related to the current needs of the groups or individuals being studied – it is “an image of the past, subjectively constructed in the present” (Megill, 2007). Mnemonic convergence shapes attitudes toward the past, reflecting the current state of society, shared by most people, reaffirming a sense of unity, and strengthening intragroup connections. Based on the theoretical developments of E.V. Ryaguzova (2019) levels of implementation of commemorative practices aimed at evaluative representation of the past in the present can be divided into three: at the level of society/state they act as a powerful manipulative resource of power that allows constructing historical and cultural memory and consolidating society based on collective experiences; at the level of the group the collective memory is formed, the members of the group are integrated, the feeling “We” is actualised; at the level of the individual the construction of a stable and positive social identity takes place, the value-semantic sphere is formed.

Recent cross-cultural studies have shown that social norms determine the meaning of memory – there is a spontaneous categorisation of perceived information based on cultural norms (Goyal et al., 2020). Cultural self-awareness also influences autobiographical memory, in particular determining the duration of memories, their emotional complexity, specificity, collective or egocentric orientation, positivity, etc. (Wang, 2001). The application of changing cultural norms according to a certain socially significant situation leads to different understandings of the same behaviour.

3. Materials and Methods

The study took place in June 2020. The sample consisted of 4th- and 5th-year students studying the course “Psychology” within various specialities at the Zaporizhzhia Polytechnic National University, a total of 123 people aged 19 to 34 years. They were divided into two experimental and one control group according to the nature of the impact on shared memory. A pilot experiment was performed according to the scheme of a simple one-factor plan. An independent variable was the manipulative intervention of the experimenter in the memories of students about events that took place in all their lives (quarantine in March-May 2020, caused by the spread of coronavirus in Ukraine). Dependent variable – individual memories of students about emotionally significant events, assessment of their importance and pessimism/optimism of forecasts for the future.

Information was collected using a narrative method. Participants were asked to write a short essay in 20 minutes, which would answer a number of questions: “Describe how you experienced the events related to the spread of coronavirus in Ukraine and in the world, as well as the quarantine restrictions caused by them? How do you remember the beginning of these events, your feelings and thoughts at that time? Have there been any changes in your mental state and consciousness? How has quarantine affected your current life (list specific negative and positive effects)? How do you see the consequences of quarantine for yourself and its possible impact on the future of all mankind?”.

The survey was conducted online in ZOOM video conferencing during distance learning. Four academic groups of 25-36 people were involved. To exclude the influence of extraneous factors that took place in group life and were beyond the control of the experimenter, each group was randomly divided in half: half of the participants received a neutral instruction (control group), and the other half received instructions containing artificially constructed memories of the past. The manipulative influence was exercised by a teacher, who had a long relationship with the audience, had authority and respect. Two versions of the manipulative instruction are built on the same scheme, but have different meanings (options for the expression of the independent variable):

1) optimistic and carefree: “I remember how in early March, when the first cases of coronavirus in Ukraine began, we were all sitting together in the class and discussing this topic. Then most of you (myself) were convinced that it would all end lightly, fearlessly and very quickly. I remember when one of you so wisely urged that people will soon forget about the coronavirus, as they forgot about all the previous outbreaks of dangerous diseases, and that humanity does not learn anything at all, because every 10-15 years there are some crises, catastrophes, revolutions, epidemics and other troubles – and it has almost no effect; everyone has lived and continues to live.”

2) alarmed: “I remember how at the beginning of March, when the first cases of coronavirus in Ukraine started, we were all sitting in the audience together and discussing this topic for a long time. Then most of you (and myself) were confused, scared, and took it very seriously. I remember when one of you so wisely urged that the coronavirus would have very large-scale and long-lasting consequences, that it was a turning point in human existence that would change everyone's way of life and way of thinking, as terrorist attacks once did to America in 2001 that radically changed social behaviour and security measures.

The control group received a neutral version of the instruction: “Today, each of you has your own experience of experiencing quarantine. Some were frightened and some were carefree; some diligently collected information about the state of affairs, and some did not want to hear anything or did not believe in the coronavirus at all; someone took it seriously and followed all the safety rules, someone ignored them. These reactions are very diverse, because they reflect the individual way of adapting to stress. The texts were processed by two assistants of the experimenter, who were trained in the method of content analysis, but did not know about the real purpose of the study and the nature of manipulative influence on certain groups. Meaningful units of texts were

recorded, which corresponded to two variants of manipulative influence: anxious-pessimistic (descriptions of reactions, which included signs of fear, stress, confusion, anxiety, illness, etc.) and carefree (“everything will pass”, “everything will be fine”, “there is no problem”, etc.).

The results obtained in the experimental and control groups were compared using Pearson criterion χ^2 (in the case of nominal data) and the U-Mann-Whitney test (in the case of quantitative data). All calculations were performed in the SPSS Statistics program. After collecting data in all groups, the true purpose of the experiment was communicated to the participants (the next couple on the schedule a week after the survey). The experimenter revealed the nature of the manipulative influence and asked the students' opinions about their own reactions and possible results of the experiment. In addition to the group discussion, training exercises on manipulation recognition were conducted to neutralise the negative effect.

4. Results and Discussion

The volume of texts in the experimental and control groups was approximately the same and amounted to 52 ± 15 words. In their recollections of the past (“How do you remember the beginning of these events, your feelings and thoughts at the time? Were there any changes in your mental state and consciousness?”), The students described a wide variety of individual reactions. During processing, the authors counted those that corresponded to the nature of the impact; responses that did not meet the above criteria were categorised as “other reactions”. In the first experimental group (EG 1), which received an optimistic and carefree instruction, more than a third of the respondents showed appropriate reactions – see table 1. At the same time in the group EG 2, which previously received an alarming instruction, the proportion of negative-pessimistic reactions was 64.5%, which is three times more than in EG 1. In the control group, the advantages of a particular direction of reactions were not detected.

Table 1: The content of memories of the past in the control and experimental groups (% of the number of respondents in the group)

Groups	Anxious-pessimistic reactions	Carefree-optimistic reactions	Others reactions	χ^2 of Pearson (comparison)
EG 1 (32 persons)	18.75	37.50	43.75	3.05; $p=0.218$
EG 2 (31 persons)	64.51	9.68	25.81	8.24; $p=0.017$
CG (60 persons)	33.33	23.33	43.33	

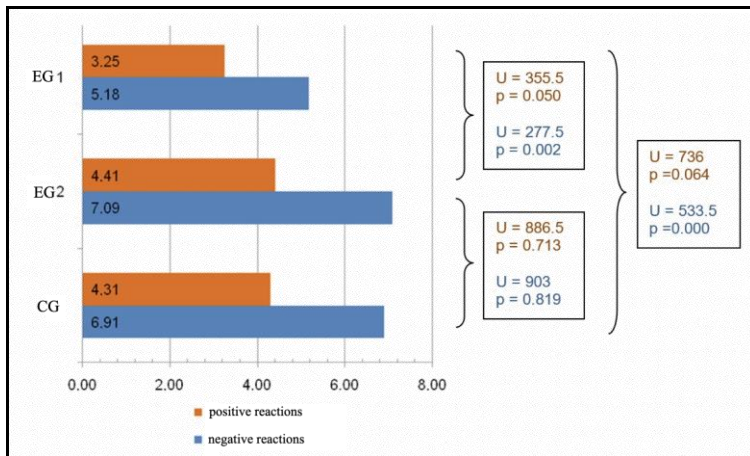
Source: own representation

The value of the consistency criterion χ^2 for the table 3×3 was 16.366, which indicates a reliable relationship between the factor and the resultant feature (significance level $p=0.003$). Comparison of the data distribution of individual experimental groups with the control one (table 1) shows that the manipulative effect on memories is most

significant in the case of EG 2, where there was an alarming instruction. Thus, negative emotions find a greater response in simulated memories.

Data on the impact of the pandemic on the current life situation of students are shown in Fig. 1. In all groups, the average number of negative reactions was greater than the number of positive ones. EG 2 students, who received a preliminary setting on the severity and scale of the effects of the pandemic, gave on average more answers, but the difference with the control group was insignificant. The EG1 group gave the lowest number of responses (statistically significant differences compared to CG on EG2). This is fully consistent with the nature of the manipulative attitudes obtained before the survey.

Figure 1: Assessment of the current situation in the control and experimental groups (average number of reactions in the group)



Source: own representation

Comparative analysis of groups showed that the influence of the experimenter was not in the direction of reactions (positive or negative), but in the total number of responses – in group EG 1 there are significantly fewer responses, and this applies to both negative and positive reactions. It was in this group that the instruction stated that the pandemic situation “does not affect anything.” Apparently, this reduced the activity of respondents, did not encourage them to make cognitive efforts to reflect and find relevant changes in their own lives. It should be noted that although in EG 2 the instruction contained the stipulation that the pandemic will have long-term consequences, change the behaviour and consciousness of each person, the average, in this case, did not differ significantly from the control group. The results lead to the conclusion that students more easily perceived and responded to the influence of “not

doing something” than “doing something”. It should be noted that the assessment of the current situation may reflect not only the manipulative influence of the experimenter, but also the features of previous memories of students.

The authors will separately dwell on the qualitative analysis of the received answers. Most students viewed the current situation in a negative light, it was difficult for them to identify the positive aspects of the impact of quarantine on their own lives (although the sample included individuals who viewed quarantine mainly in a positive light – 18.3% in the control group). Among the negative consequences of quarantine, students most often mentioned domestic inconveniences (wearing a mask, inability to move by transport), forced restriction of communication with friends and relatives, stress, deteriorating physical condition (including overweight), reduced efficiency, danger, insecurity and future uncertainty in personal prospects, deteriorating economic situation in society (reduced profits, higher prices of goods and services), inability to lead a normal life, worries about the health of loved ones, limited opportunities for leisure and development (each option was named by more than 10% of respondents). Among the positive consequences of quarantine: free time for leisure, useful experience of “survival” in difficult conditions. Older part-time students named different options for reviewing life values and rethinking (own resources and opportunities, relationships, values, chosen career path, etc.), expanding existing competencies. Regarding the perception of their own future, a significant difference between the groups was revealed – see Table 2.

Table 2: The content of perception of the possible future in the control and experimental groups (% of the number of respondents in the group)

Groups	Anxious-pessimistic reactions	Carefree-optimistic reactions	Others reactions	χ^2 of Pearson (comparison with the CG)
EG 1 (32 persons)	18.75	53.12	28.13	5.52; $p=0.064$
EG 2 (31 persons)	67.74	12.90	19.36	11.89; $p=0.003$
CG (60 persons)	30.00	28.33	41.67	

Source: own representation

Comparison of the overall distribution of data in the three groups (table 3×3) showed a significant relationship between the factor and the resultant feature (calculated value of the criterion $\chi^2 = 23.60$, the level of significance $p < 0.001$). A comparison of the distributions of the individual experimental groups confirms, as in the previous case, the stronger influence of the anxious-concerned instruction, which provokes pessimistic views on the future. A somewhat unexpected result was that previous manipulations affected the assessment of a possible future to a greater extent than memories of the past. This can be explained by the fact that the future is a realm of the unknown, in the assessment of which young people do not have the opportunity to rely on their own experience, so they attract social attitudes and suggestions. Previous cognitive work done by students should also be taken into account: memories of the

past and analysis of the present situation. Previous research has shown that perceptions of the past affect the interpretation of the future, with assessments of future prospects usually more positive and less specific (Topcu & Hirst, 2020). These results fully confirm these data.

Previous studies of memories of traumatic events (Raccanello et al., 2019) have shown that in the long run the richness and emotional saturation of memories (including negative) decreases – a certain generalised view of events is formed, which depends little on how a person actually survived trouble.

The experiments of H.-Y. Choi, E.A. Kensinger, and S. Rajaram (2017) showed that the social transfer of memory depends on the group structure: for example, in isolated communities, negative collective memories are amplified and positive ones are supplanted, and a diverse group structure contributes to the spread of false memories. This highlights the need to study additional factors that are not taken into account in this experiment. In particular, this applies to consideration of the cohesion of a student body and the nature of the relationship with an experimenter.

5. Conclusions

Manipulative influence on the memory of significant events affects the individual diversity of memories and reactions in students, reducing them to a certain pattern provided from the outside. Negative emotions find a greater response in simulated memories than positive ones, causing anxious and anxious reactions. Memories of the past, in turn, influence the analysis of the current life situation and the construction of prospects for the future. The results of the study showed that the manipulative effect on the memory of socially significant events (the falsified notion of past events, which had two variants of expression: optimistic-carefree or anxious-pessimistic) significantly affects the individual diversity of memories, reducing them to a given pattern. When analysing the perception of one's own future, a significant difference between the studied groups was revealed, which showed the connection between the factor and the resultant trait.

This study allowed the authors to record memories shortly after the events (two or three months) and showed that even in these conditions, individual memory is vulnerable to external manipulations. But because stress is not yet sufficiently edited, negative and anxious reactions are more responsive. The study does not claim to be an exhaustive study of the topic, but convincingly proves the impact of manipulation on the individual and shared memory of socially significant events. It outlines new perspectives on the study of collective memory, in particular on the influence of reference persons in groups with varying degrees of cohesion.

Authorship

V.I.B. and L.K.V. conceptualized and designed the study. V.I.B., T.O.G. and V.L.P. were responsible for data curation and analyses. T.V.Kh. was responsible for overall

project supervision. All the authors contributed equally to the manuscript preparation and to manuscript drafting.

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